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ABSTRACT

Public consultations had revealed that access to education was a significant concern in rural and remote areas of Australia, particularly in relation to ongoing economic decline. In response, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission initiated the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education. The inquiry took evidence at formal public hearings in the capital cities of every state and territory and at less formal meetings with parents, students, educators, and community members in rural and remote areas of every state and the Northern Territory. The inquiry received 300 written and e-mailed submissions, including one from the government or education department in every state, the Northern Territory, and the Commonwealth. The inquiry also commissioned a survey from the Youth Research Centre at Melbourne University to which 3,128 individuals responded. This report summarizes major concerns raised by the public, drawing on selected quotes that are broadly representative. Following an introduction, chapter 2 describes the numbers, locations, schooling arrangements, and outcomes of rural and remote students. Chapters 3-6 cover the following themes: availability and accessibility of schools, distance education, travel, and financial aid; schooling quality (curriculum, staff, facilities, information technology, and other learning opportunities); students with disabilities (numbers, discrimination, barriers to integration, and some special programs); and Indigenous students (numbers, situation, access, barriers to participation and support, outcomes, Indigenous cultural studies, and Indigenous languages). The final chapter presents an overview of the human rights provisions relevant to rural and remote education. (Contains 14 references.) (TD)

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ED 448 950

"Emerging Themes"

National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
March 2000

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1. Introduction

> *States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:*
> *(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;*
> *(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;*
> *(c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;*
> *(d) Make education and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;*
> *(e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop out rates* (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 28.1).

The inquiry's context

The National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education was initiated by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in February 1999. The Commission's 1998 *Bush Talks* consultations on the human rights concerns of regional, rural and remote Australians had revealed that access to education of an appropriate standard and quality was a significant concern in rural and remote areas. The broad context for the provision of education in country Australia is one of rural and remote area economic decline as expressed in evidence by the Queensland Catholic Education Commission.

> *We see that the bush is attempting to adjust to pressures that have resulted from economic rationalism, mainly from government initiatives which are trying to expose Australian industry and agriculture to international competition. This has caused rationalisation in the bush: closure, shrinkage, relocation; and rationalisation of businesses, services, government services; all in an attempt to consolidate operations in the interest of greater efficiency.*
>
> *This has made living in remote and rural Australia less attractive to a number of people, including teachers and parents of children, and it's also made access to educational services more difficult and all those ancillary services that surround educational services ... [T]he fundamental issue is that distances provide a tyranny and a barrier to the provision of educational services and we see it as a social justice issue, the provision of that access* (Brisbane hearing).

The significance of equity in education in this context has recently been emphasised by the Productivity Commission.

> *Education levels are often linked to improved employment prospects and higher incomes. In particular, levels of education and training are important when a regional economy is changing and people are required to cope with changes in the location and types of employment available. For example, while further education may not be a necessary requirement for some occupations in country areas, it can be a useful credential for those wishing to enter occupations where employment opportunities are greater. It can also provide important life skills which improve people's ability to adjust to changing circumstances and take up new opportunities* (1999, page 18).

Terms of reference

The inquiry investigated the provision of education for children in rural and remote Australia with reference to

- the availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling
- the quality of educational services, including technological support services
- whether the education available to children with disabilities, Indigenous children and children from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds complies with their human rights.

These terms of reference invite comment on a wide range of issues and themes including

- the costs for families associated with education for children in rural and/or remote areas
- the equity and adequacy of social security and other provisions to support children in education
- funding models for education and related services, including transport and accommodation
- teacher incentives, professional development and staff retention
- the quality of distance education
- the quality of technological support for teaching and learning in rural and/or remote areas
- the extent to which students with disabilities can be integrated into mainstream schools
- the cultural appropriateness of education services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their communities.

Information received

The inquiry received information about these and other topics from many thousands of people across Australia. We received 300 written and e-mailed submissions including one from the government or the education department in every State, the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth. We took evidence at formal public hearings in every State and Territory including every capital city and held less formal meetings with parents, students, teachers, other education workers and community members in rural and remote areas of every State and the Northern Territory. The inquiry also commissioned a survey (the YRC

survey) from the Youth Research Centre at Melbourne University to which 3,128 individuals responded in writing or during a two day phone-in.

Interested readers can find a great deal of the information received by the inquiry on the Commission's website, including the report of the YRC survey, transcripts and notes of evidence and submissions received electronically at www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/rural/education

Briefing papers which detail more fully the emerging themes summarised in this booklet are also available on the website or directly from the Commission. They are

- The human right to education
- Commonwealth income support for students
- Information technology infrastructure
- School education for students with disabilities
- Career structures, allowances and incentives for teachers
- Annotated bibliography on rural and remote education
- Indigenous education

This publication

This booklet summarises the major themes, issues and concerns arising in the inquiry. It is not an analysis of those themes but presents them in the words of some of those who raised them. It does not attempt to be comprehensive: many other issues were raised with us. However, the issues identified here are those of most serious concern or of concern to most people. We cannot quote all witnesses. However, the quotes selected are broadly representative. We have not detailed here the information provided by education departments on their programs. These are readily available to readers with internet access as all government and departmental submissions are published in full on the Commission's website.

Although this booklet identifies the issues the Commission will take up in future reports, including reports to Parliament, it does not make findings or recommendations. The inquiry's recommendations will be published in June 2000.

These recommendations will be further detailed in individual reports on 'Access to Education', 'Rural Students with Special Needs', 'Indigenous Education' and 'Information Technologies in Education'. All publications will address the key question for the inquiry:

> **What is necessary to ensure that, by the age of 18, each child in Australia has received the education he or she requires to participate to his or her full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community?**

The challenge for our governments and indeed for the community as a whole is whether we as a nation are prepared to do what is necessary to achieve that.

2. Rural and remote students

> *States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status* (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 2.1).

In this chapter

- Students and schooling types
- Outcomes and options

Students and schooling types

In August 1996 there were more than 1.8 million students in primary schools across Australia and 1.3 million in secondary schools. One-quarter of Australian primary students and one-third of secondary students attend non-government schools (DETYA 1996, page 59).

The best available national estimates indicate that between one-quarter and one-third attend school in rural and remote areas. For example, 66% of Victorian students attend school in metropolitan Melbourne, 11% in provincial cities, 15% in rural areas and 8% in remote parts of the State (Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training submission, page 5). In NSW 34.6% of students attend rural and remote schools.

Only about 5% of students attend schools which qualify for the Commonwealth's Country Areas Program (CAP) funding and only 12,243 students receive the Commonwealth's Assistance for Isolated Children, fewer than 1% of Australian students.

Enrolments in country schools are typically much lower than in metropolitan schools. For example, enrolments in schools in South Australia range upwards from 18 students at Salt Creek Primary School and 34 schools have enrolments of fewer than 40 students (SA Department of Education, Training and Employment submission, page 5). In Tasmania a school on Cape Barren Island has six students and in Western Australia there is one school with fewer than ten students. In Queensland 121 government schools have fewer than 20 students (Education Queensland submission, page 1).

Because country schools are so much smaller on average than metropolitan schools, a higher proportion of schools are situated in rural areas as compared with the percentage of students. For example in NSW and Victoria 48% of government schools are in non-metropolitan areas compared with only about 34% of students. In the NT nearly 53% of schools but just over 23% of students are located in remote areas.

Many students expressed their appreciation of what a small country school can offer them.

> *Our school [St Cecilia's College] is small. There are only about 100 students at our school so we know everyone. We feel listened to at our school* (student meeting in South Hedland WA).

> *I went to Darwin High before we came here and it was huge, and then we came here and it was much easier to learn. You might only have 20 kids in your class but there is more opportunity to learn and teachers do really care about if you pass or not* (student meeting in Kununurra WA).

The following table indicates the impact of the Commonwealth's Country Areas Program funding on the government and non-government education sectors in each jurisdiction in 1996.

Students enrolled in schools eligible for CAP funding by jurisdiction and system – 1996

Jurisdiction & level	Government		Non-govt		Total	
	N	% *	N	% *	N	% *
NSW						
Primary	17,633	3.9	3,716	2.3	21,349	3.5
Secondary	9,668	3.1	197	0.1	9,865	2.2
Total	27,301	3.6	3,913	1.3	31,214	2.9
Victoria						
Primary	22,971	7.6	4,493	3.4	27,464	6.3
Secondary	12,918	6.0	920	0.7	13,838	4.1
Total	35,889	6.9	5,413	2.1	41,302	5.3
Queensland						
Primary	23,264	8.7	3,406	4.3	26,670	7.7
Secondary	8,820	6.0	455	0.6	9,275	4.1
Total	32,084	7.8	3,861	2.5	35,945	6.3
South Australia						
Primary	9,475	7.9	449	1.1	9,924	6.2
Secondary	4,171	7.0	0	-	4,171	4.8
Total	13,646	7.8	449	0.7	14,095	5.7
Western Australia						
Primary	14,609	10.0	1,589	3.7	16,198	8.6
Secondary	6,184	7.7	444	1.1	6,628	5.6
Total	20,793	9.2	2,033	2.5	22,826	7.4
Tasmania						
Primary	3,642	10.1	253	2.3	3,895	8.3
Secondary	1,914	6.9	0	-	1,914	5.0
Total	5,556	8.7	253	1.2	5,809	6.8
Northern Territory						
Primary	8,808	43.6	300	6.1	9,108	36.3
Secondary	2,329	29.2	0	-	2,329	21.5
Total	11,137	39.5	300	3.9	11,437	31.8
Australia						
Primary	100,402	7.3	14,206	3.0	114,608	6.2
Secondary	46,004	5.3	2,016	0.5	48,020	3.7
Total	**146,406**	**6.6**	**16,222**	**1.8**	**162,628**	**5.2**

Source: DETYA 1996, page 59.
* Percentages compare CAP-funded students with all in that Jurisdiction and System.

Relatively small proportions of rural and remote students enrolled are from non-English speaking backgrounds other than Indigenous languages. For example, in the Rockhampton diocese in Queensland only 1 of the 1,128 students in Catholic schools is from a non-English speaking background. Compared with metropolitan areas a somewhat lower proportion of children with disabilities is enrolled in rural and remote schools. In Catholic schools in the Rockhampton diocese, for example, there are 9 children with disabilities (Catholic Education Office Rockhampton submission, section 2).

Outcomes and options

School retention

Country students are far less likely to finish school than their metropolitan counterparts.

Year 12 completion rates by locality and sex - Australia, 1994-1998 (%)

Year	Urban			Rural			Remote			Total		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
94	66	76	71	57	71	64	51	65	58	63	74	68
95	64	75	69	54	70	62	46	59	52	61	73	67
96	62	72	67	55	72	63	46	65	55	59	71	65
97	61	71	66	54	70	62	43	62	51	58	71	64
98	62	73	67	55	71	63	48	61	54	60	72	66

Source: DETYA submission, Schedule 5

School attendance of 16 year olds, top and bottom 5 regions

Top 5 regions			Bottom 5 regions		
Mosman	NSW	97.3%	Kimberley	WA	40.4%
Ku-ring-gai	NSW	97.3%	Southern	TAS	46.9%
Camberwell	VIC	96.7%	Mersey-Lyell	TAS	48.3%
Brighton	VIC	96.5%	Balance (ie outside Darwin)	NT	51.1%
Woollahra	NSW	96.1%	South West and Central West	QLD	52.6%
Australia		80.2%	Australia		80.2%

Source: ABS 1996.

In Tasmania, the inquiry was told

> *[T]he retention rates in many rural areas are disappointingly low. The main reason is undoubtedly the requirement for many students in these regions to have to travel long distances or board away from home, in order to attend a secondary college.*

A report of a community consultation with young people, government, youth and community organisations in rural and isolated communities prepared for the Office of Youth Affairs in 1998 identified the following issues and needs related to poor retention rates:
Reduced access to educational resources
Lack of information about education and training options
Lack of access to vocational training
The need to be able to access higher education on the Internet
The need for more opportunity to meet other students from remote areas
Reduced motivation
Transport difficulties and the long travelling distances to schools
The lack of relevance of schooling to every-day living
The need for school to prepare young people for work (Tasmanian Department of Education submission, pages 16 and 17).

In Victoria in 1999 the retention rate from Years 7 to 12 in metropolitan regions was 81.5% compared to 67.9% in the non-metropolitan regions. The highest retention rate was recorded in the Southern metropolitan region at 84.6% and the lowest rate was in the Gippsland region at 64.4% (Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training submission, pages 5-9).

School performance

On average the school performance of country students lags somewhat behind that of urban students. For example, the Tasmanian Education Department analysed the reading performance of Year 3 students according to their distance from the nearest urban centre. The results are set out in the following table.

Analysis of reading performance by distance-from-centre (Year 3, 1998 Literacy Monitoring Program)

Distance category (km from nearest urban centre)	Number of students	Mean reading performance (max possible score = 26)
0 to 20.0	3,353	18.3
20.1 to 40.0	946	17.6
40.1 to 60.0	274	17.9
60.1 to 80.0	175	16.7
80.1 to 100.0	135	17.2
> 100	267	17.8
State	5,150	18.0

Source: Tasmanian Education Department submission, page 9. Note that the submission points out that, based on these data, "there did not appear to be any pattern of increasing or decreasing reading performance with increasing distance-from-centre category."

On the other hand, the inquiry was told of some excellent results from very isolated and small rural schools.

> *In 1996 and again in 1998 this school, Bourke High School, had two students in the top 10% of the State as far as their tertiary entrance rate for the University Admission Index went. In 1996, 1997 and 1998 all the students who finished Year 12 of this school who wanted to go to university got an offer of a place in the course that they were after* (Michael Chapman, Principal of Bourke High School, Bourke NSW hearing).

Tertiary participation

Although they are around one-third of school students, rural and remote students constitute only about 17% of tertiary students in Australia (DETYA submission, page 16). Nevertheless, the number engaging in tertiary education now (approximately 119,000) is substantially higher than in 1990 (approximately 40,000).

3. Availability and accessibility of schools

> *States Parties recognize the right of the child to education and ... shall ... (a) make primary education compulsory and available free to all [and] (b) encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child ...* (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 28.1).

In this chapter

- Early childhood education
- Primary schools
- Secondary schools
- Boarding schools
- Distance education
- Travel
- Financial assistance
- Recommendations received

State and Territory education departments provide primary schools in rural and remote locations once there is a critical mass of primary aged children. A remote community of fewer than 1,000 people is unlikely to be provided with a secondary school. Some 'primary' schools extend their provision beyond Year 6 or Year 7 to Year 8 or 9 and sometimes to Year 10. Secondary provision to Year 12 is almost non-existent in remote communities.

YRC survey respondents identified three key issues affecting access to education: cost, transport and income support (Survey Report page 18). Generally the survey found that appropriate education exists for students across all geographic and population groups but that 'the inherent costs and time involved in gaining access to these resources constrain access, and impact on the quality of the education ultimately delivered' (page 22).

Early childhood education

Early childhood education is increasingly recognised as a key to successful education outcomes.

> *What the latest research is showing is that the environment that surrounds children from birth to five years has more to do with their long-term health and also their academic success than anything else that happens to them in later years. For this reason it's imperative that children receive the best care and education in these early years. So early education programs need to be family-focused, culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate and by investing resources in families and appropriate early-education programs in the early formative years the government can actually save millions of dollars on later intervention programs that in many cases have limited success* (Sister Mary Vadja, Notre Dame University, Broome WA hearing).

This is particularly true for children from minority cultures.

> *At Toomelah there's a big difference because of the pre-school. They know their numbers, how to count, their colours, everything. It's definitely needed. It'll bring literacy and numeracy levels up* (meeting with Boggabilla ASSPA representatives in Moree NSW).

Early childhood and pre-school education are not compulsory in Australia. State and Territory governments are yet to provide early childhood education for all Australian children and in many rural and remote regions of Australia there is no provision.

> *Our bilateral agreements are trying to tackle that [pre-school provision], to get them [state and territory governments] to ... identify what level of need there is in terms of pre-school education and where there aren't pre-school education provisions, and plan to try and address that* (Peter Buckskin, Assistant Secretary, Indigenous Education, DETYA, Canberra hearing).

In the Northern Territory, for example, the Department of Education operates 97 pre-school education programs, 49 of them in Aboriginal communities. However, according to the NT Indigenous Education Council the availability and accessibility of early childhood education for families living on NT homelands such as Yambah is extremely limited. In many of the homelands early childhood development programs are non-existent. This has a dramatic impact on English language learning for homeland children (Beverley Angeles, Indigenous Education Council, Darwin hearing).

Primary schools

In rural towns and some remote communities primary education is provided in small local schools. A relatively small proportion of Australian children cannot access a local primary school. They include some Indigenous children on remote communities and some children living on pastoral stations. Distance education at primary level is intended to meet the needs of these children. A small number of isolated children relocate to boarding school for the primary years when the family is unable to provide distance education support at home (ICPA Australia submission, page 3).

However, some Aboriginal children, notably those living in small 'homeland' communities in the Northern Territory and Queensland, are unable to access primary schooling of any kind.

> *Of the twenty three (23) homelands in the region, only eight (8) are judged as eligible for support from the Northern Territory Government. A number of other homelands have previously trialed schooling programs, but due to attendance figures that the bureaucracy regarded as unsatisfactory or 'uneconomical', these trials have not been approved. However, it should be noted, school age children continue to reside in their communities without access to schooling. One estimate suggests*

that in the Arnhem Land region, some 700 to 1000 children do not have access to education (Nambara Schools Council NT submission, page 23).

Here at Dhuruputjpi, we haven't got enough children to start a school. We are crying out for an education service here (Dhukal Wirrpanda, Dhuruputjpi Homeland Centre meeting).

Some isolated communities with a significant school age population have NO school at all. For example outstations around Doomadgee have up to 200 school age students but no school (Queensland Teachers' Union submission, page 1).

Where innovative approaches to homelands education provision have been adopted, they have proven successful models.

The education program that the Nambara Schools Council has guided Yirrkala Homelands Schools to develop for the eight eligible homelands we believe is at the leading edge of schooling programs for remote areas, given restrictions in funding and staffing levels. Through a cyclical process of planning, curriculum resource development, reflection, evaluation, assessment and replanning, and through close consultation with community members, we have been able to deliver a service that:

- *is community-based, community-controlled and tailored to the needs of the homeland communities*
- *employs - and provides further training and professional development to - sixteen Yolngu Homelands Teachers, who also research and develop appropriate curriculum programs and resources*
- *utilises and continually develops appropriate literacy and numeracy curriculum materials and resources*
- *is aided by a team of seven Visiting Teachers from Yirrkala, who are curriculum advisers and developers.*

Each of the 8 homelands are provided with support from Visiting Teachers each week. The Visiting Teachers assist the Homelands Teachers in the delivery of education, but are usually not involved in the actual teaching of students, as their role is to provide support to the Homeland Teachers, and in collaboratively developing curricula for the homelands classrooms (Nambara Schools Council NT submission, page 21).

Secondary schools

Secondary schools are generally less readily accessible in rural and remote areas than primary schools. In the NT, for example, there are only 29 secondary schools (13 are government schools), most of which are in urbanised areas. Outside the major urban centres there is very little provision of secondary education, especially to Year 12 level. Yet the NT spends 50% more per capita than the national average on government secondary schooling (Department of Family and Community Services 1999).

> *The majority of students, who have been on Distance Education for their primary years or have attended an isolated rural and remote small school, choose to board away from home to access an urban, city or large regional high school. This is done to improve students' social and interaction skills and because secondary schooling is generally beyond a supervisor's ability to help effectively* (ICPA Australia submission, page 4).

The lack of secondary provision in the NT impacts particularly on Indigenous children. Only 87.6% of Aboriginal boys participate even in the compulsory years of schooling. Participation in post-compulsory schooling in the NT drops to 39.7% for Aboriginal females and 28.2% for Aboriginal males (NT Department of Education submission, page 5).

Boarding school, family removal to an urban area and distance education are theoretically available for remote area students. However, for many Indigenous students each of these options violates cultural expectations and needs and is therefore unrealistic.

> *Another option currently being trialed in conjunction with the Catholic Education Office is the secondary 'area school' trial at Bathurst Island. Should this trial prove to be successful, it will provide a model for the extension of formal secondary education to other remote communities* (NT Department of Education submission, pages 11-12).

The substantial Aboriginal communities of Doomadgee, Mornington Island and Aurukun in Queensland have no senior secondary provision (Queensland Teachers' Union submission, page 1). In Tasmania fewer than half of rural secondary schools (22 of 51) offer Years 11 and 12. A high proportion of senior secondary students, therefore, must leave home to study.

Access to both primary and secondary schooling is also constrained by inappropriate school timetables in some regions and for some students. The inquiry was told that inflexibility in timetabling which fails to accommodate the need for students to help on the property during some seasons or to participate in cultural activities impacts adversely on school participation and attendance.

> *In many of the remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, it was felt that the learning environment did not provide enough flexibility to cater fully for the needs of the children. The school year and school day operates as it does in other schools in Western Australia, and this does not allow for cultural obligations that the children have. Traditional business, including law business and initiations, normally occurs between July and November. Everyone is required to attend these and camp in the bush which means the children miss much of this school term* (YRC Survey Report page 37).

Boarding schools

Australian pastoral families traditionally schooled their children at home during the primary years, with the assistance of School of the Air, and sent them to boarding schools in the secondary years. Boarding is less affordable now than in previous generations, however. YRC survey respondents reported boarding costs of up to $22,000 per student per year (Survey Report page 24).

> *The average boarding cost per student for 1999 at a boarding school is $8,048 and at a school term hostel is $5,561. An additional $6,000 per annum for tuition fees if applicable.*
>
> *There are other expenses that isolated rural and remote families experience such as travelling to attend school functions, often up to 6 and 8 hours plus, over rough roads causing much wear and tear on vehicles* (ICPA Australia submission, page 8).

Financial support for families whose children are at boarding schools or otherwise living away from home to study is available to eligible families from the Commonwealth (Assistance for Isolated Children). A Basic Boarding Allowance of $3,539 is paid for each eligible student and an additional boarding allowance of $887 is also available subject to parental income and actual boarding fees paid.

Some States supplement the Commonwealth's provision. Tasmania, for example, pays a senior secondary accommodation allowance for students in Years 11 and 12 of $828 annually which is not means tested.

Where boarding is the only option for remote area Indigenous children, such as in the NT, WA, SA and Queensland, it is rarely successful.

> *They are away from their families and their culture. The language is different. At times they are inclined to only stay down in Perth about three months or so and then they come back and they don't want to go back [to Perth] because they are away from their families. They should be given a chance for education in their own area, within their own language and to speak their own dialects* (Tom Birch, Kimberley Land Council, Broome WA hearing).
>
> *I worked at a boarding school for 15 years. A lot of children who came to boarding school from remote communities did not last there. They left school and went back because they missed their family and friends. These kids have a strong connection with their community so it is difficult for them when they leave. If they had support groups to help them they might be able to cope better at boarding school* (public meeting in Normanton Qld).
>
> *Homesickness mitigates against the retention of some Aboriginal students in boarding schools. It is a significant factor, which accounts for a number of Indigenous boarding students leaving within the first six months of their arrival at the school* (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 15).

Distance education

The majority of distance education students are primary school-aged children. A home supervisor, usually the child's mother, supports their learning at home Distance education is delivered by telephone, radio, computer, telematics and/or, less commonly, interactive television. Telephone and radio are still most frequently utilised. Phone calls to teachers are also widely used in order to obtain educational support and to solve problems (DETYA submission, page 76).

Financial support for students studying by distance education is available for qualifying isolated children from the Commonwealth's Assistance for Isolated Children. The current Distance Education allowance is $1,000 a year for primary students and $1,500 for secondary students who study at home.

A much-appreciated advantage of distance education is the close relationship which develops between supervising parent and student.

> *Such an advantage included both the amount of one-to-one contact between the child and the home tutor and the amount of parental involvement (and hence understanding of curriculum and the student's progress). This allowed for an early recognition of problems or of areas requiring revision, and the ability to change teaching styles to accommodate learning needs* (YRC Survey Report page 33).

Overall witnesses and YRC survey respondents were happy with the standard of distance education and the outcomes it has delivered.

> *Parents in Western Australia were generally positive about the curriculum and found the Distance Education lessons well set out and thorough, although some parents and students said that there was a large amount of written work expected.*
>
> *Queensland parents similarly reported that the Queensland curriculum had an excellent base. It was said that this curriculum is particularly designed with the lifestyle and schooling demands of Distance Education children and their supervisors clearly in mind.*
>
> *There was substantially more dissatisfaction with the curriculum expressed by parents from South Australia who were involved in Distance Education ... They claimed that there is a lack of understanding by the developers of the curriculum materials of what learning in an isolated rural location entails. In particular, they alleged that the curriculum is written with face-to-face schooling in mind ... The curriculum also is said to require a whole school day of supervision, which is difficult for the working farm parent to provide* (YRC Survey Report pages 40-41).

> *They say Open Access provides equitable options for our kids. What a joke … There are so many problems, stuff-ups, faulty infrastructure doesn't allow video conferencing to happen very easily - and poor quality phone lines make it difficult* (South Australian teacher quoted in YRC Survey Report page 54).

Distance education is not suitable for all students.

> *Many rural and remote parents want the socialisation outcomes of education for their children provided through a boarding experience. Such aspects cannot be met to the same degree through distance education* (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 11).

In particular the inquiry was told that very few Indigenous students study in this way and that students with disabilities are inadequately supported.

> *Research conducted in 1998 through Sydney Distance Education Primary School found, however, that many Aboriginal students who were eligible for enrolment were not enrolling because their families did not know about the service or considered that it would not meet their needs* (NSW Department of Education and Training submission, page 51).

> *For a number of reasons, Aboriginal people have not participated to any meaningful extent in distance education and School of the Air programs. One reason - and this impacts on the delivery of Indigenous education in general - is that many parents perceive their lack of resources and literacy and numeracy skills as barriers to their children's participation in such programs, nor have advances in technology proved the solution they promised to be* (David Curtis, ATSIC Commissioner, Melbourne hearing).

The YRC Survey found that few if any special needs teachers are working in distance education to assist students with disabilities (Survey Report page 54).

> *I think there was almost a third of all the children enrolled at schools of the air that had some sort of difficulty with learning, whether it be a reading problem or a curriculum problem. ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] is another big problem out there and those students from families have no access to any facilities* (Helen Newland, Isolated Children's Parents' Association WA, Perth hearing).

Distance education is also costly.

> *Costs for children being educated at home include the following:*
>
> *Cost of setting up and maintaining a school room.*

The cost of running the generator for extended hours to provide power for necessary 'power driven' school items. Eg computers and radios for On Air lessons.

Travel to compulsory school and extra curricula activities and added expenses involved with rental of accommodation and extra travelling expenses for parents to keep in contact so that the family unit is kept strong are examples of additional expenses (ICPA Australia submission, page 7).

Travel

Many of the major disadvantages caused for rural schooling by distance are encapsulated in this submission from Victoria.

It is often hard to access inservice training for staff as the cost of bringing high profile presenters from Melbourne is prohibitive. There is a great deal of specialists' time taken up with travelling between rural and remote schools which is taken out of their teaching time. Students have to travel long distances to participate in extra-curricula activities eg. swimming, sports days, arts council performances. Great deal of time is spent travelling for these extra activities quite often with students leaving home at very early hours of the morning and not getting home again until late at night. There is a great deal of time spent by students just travelling to and from school on a day to day basis. Travelling time especially impacts on students studying the VCE [Years 11 and 12] as study days related to particular subjects are all held in metropolitan areas. This also means they lose a whole day of school which has to be caught up on in their own time (Swan Hill District Council of Parents' Clubs Vic submission, page 1).

Prolonged travel times can mean children do not attend school at all. Absenteeism among Indigenous children in the Hedland WA area is about 30% and is partly attributable to travel times.

There are also specific problems of attendance for children from outlying communities such as Tjalku Wara and Tjalka Boorda. Children must catch the bus at 6.30 in the morning if they want to come to school in Hedland. This makes it very difficult for the children and the families. There is no time for breakfast (public meeting in South Hedland WA).

The lack of transport options and the costs imposed on families were raised by many witnesses.

And just travelling to school every day from Lakes Entrance [into Bairnsdale] takes 45-50 minutes by bus and then you have to come home again. It leaves less time for studying. You can stay after school for sport but you'd have to make your own way home. There's only one bus each way each day (student meeting in Bairnsdale Vic).

Students in outlying areas, who catch a bus to school, cannot link to the bus that takes town-dwelling [Bingara] students to Warialda as this bus leaves too early. Parents can board the students in Bingara so that they can catch the bus or board them at Warialda or the town of the school of their choice. Either way this adds to the financial burden on the family to educate their children, an additional burden on many families who are currently under pressure from the rural recession, as well as the social change in that their children must be away from their homes (Rick Hutton, Bingara P&C Association NSW, submission).

One low income family with several children said they could not afford the petrol money to travel each day to the nearest bus stop - 20km, so their teenage son did not attend high school. He received distance education material, but his parents did not have sufficient education themselves to assist him. They had no phone, so he could not access phone support. The parents were attempting to educate the younger children themselves. A number of families with young children did not send them to school due to the bus travel time, and the condition of the roads. This would mean young children leaving home at 7am and getting home at 5, and they felt this was too much for their age (Maurine Gibson, Social Planner, Wide Bay Burnett Qld, submission).

We strongly feel that the conveyancing allowance in its current form is most inequitable. It now stands at $300 per child, irrespective of kilometres travelled. For example, a family with 4 children who live 5 kilometres from school or bus service is eligible for $1200 per year. Whereas a family of 2 travelling 80 kilometres is only getting $600 although they travel 16 times the distance (Rowena Turner, Bindi Vic, submission, page 2).

The inquiry was told that some school bus services refuse access to some students.

[A]t present preschoolers are not being recognised as 'students' by the Department of Transport and therefore cannot be guaranteed safe transport to and from preschool. We ask that preschoolers be included by the Department of Public Transport to have equal, fair access to their preschool destination (Hillston Preschool Inc. NSW submission).

[T]here is limited access for independent rural school students to the State Government school bus services in South Australia that currently operate in rural and country regions. This is yet another example of discrimination against families who choose to send their children to a non-government school. If they enrolled their children at a government school this service would be available (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 22).

In this state the school bus policy produces a form of social engineering whereby students must attend their local government school to be entitled to travel on the government-provided bus service. If there is

room, however, students bypassing their local government school and thus exercising choice are allowed free travel to the non-government school in the town serviced by the bus. It is not permissible to bypass the local government school and attend another government school in the next town serviced by that bus .. Thus, choice is there for those who can pay for private education but not for those who choose the government sector (Gwen Secomb, SA Association of School Parent Clubs, Adelaide hearing).

The poor condition of many rural and remote area roads may prevent children accessing education for long periods.

[Mungindi is] isolated, as the town is situated more than 100km from a major centre. We are further isolated by the poor state of the roads. To the closest major centre, the road is partly gravel and becomes virtually inaccessible in wet weather.

This isolation leads to many disadvantages for our children. The lack of sealed roads means that some children cannot attend school for weeks if we have rain. Many children miss days from school even if we have light rain. This is not equality in education. Preschool, primary and secondary education should be available and accessible to all children regardless of where they live. I do not believe this happens in rural and remote areas of Australia. This is denying children their rights and their needs, which includes their social, emotional and intellectual development (Mungindi pre-school director, in St Joseph's Mungindi NSW submission).

Financial assistance

The greatest education 'disadvantage' faced by people in rural and remote locations is that to gain access to an education - any education - they have to pay more. This can include the cost of travel, of board, loss of income, excursions and so on. There is provision of financial assistance but parents report that this fails to meet costs - in the end, parents have to pay. While some families can afford these costs, for others access to any form of education is a financial burden - and one that many school students assist in meeting through extensive part-time work. Other families find the burden too great, and students drop out of school early (YRC Survey Report page 18).

Assistance for Isolated Children

As outlined above, the Commonwealth offers direct financial support for education to some isolated families through Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC). Although more than 95% of applications for AIC are successful (Dr Evan Arthur, Assistant Secretary, Literacy and Special Programs Branch, DETYA, Canberra hearing), the inquiry received criticism of the scheme. Because of increased rural poverty, families who previously only needed a small measure

of assistance to send their children away for schooling now need much more As it is not forthcoming, they may withdraw their children from school.

> *When the Assistance for Isolated Children was originally brought in, in 1973, it was set at 55% of the average boarding fee ... Only twice has it come to 55% of that or close to 55% of that average boarding fee ... [In 2000] the basic boarding allowance is $3,539. If it was 55% it would be $4,192, so there's already a shortfall there, without taking into consideration how the boarding fees will increase by 5% and the effect of the FBT [Fringe Benefit Tax] and GST. There is a maximum allowance which is means-tested and that's an additional $887, but it still doesn't come anywhere near the cost of boarding* (Megan McNicholl, National President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Canberra hearing).

One AIC eligibility requirement is that the student does not live within 56 kilometres of the nearest appropriate government school. An 'appropriate' government school is one 'which takes a person through to the completion of secondary school and the acquisition of an appropriate qualification at the end of secondary school' (Dr Evan Arthur, Assistant Secretary, Literacy and Special Programs Branch, DETYA, Canberra hearing). This proximity requirement means that students wishing to undertake specialist courses not offered at their nearest school are not eligible for AIC.

> *There are several schools in this state that have specific courses ... [O]ne ... at Cleve offers a specific course in dryland farming (which is practised over most of SA). However students are being denied access to these courses because cash strapped families are unable to access AIC to send these children away for these specific courses* (ICPA SA submission, page 9).

DETYA defended the requirement as follows in evidence to the inquiry.

> *It is not the intention of the payment to ensure that the education provided is the full education which an individual might desire. It is designed to be responding to certain requirements for an appropriate education ...* (Dr Evan Arthur, Assistant Secretary, Literacy and Special Programs Branch, DETYA, Canberra hearing).

Youth Allowance

Commonwealth financial assistance is available more widely to support senior secondary students, as well as tertiary students, through the common Youth Allowance. Unlike the basic AIC allowances, however, Youth Allowance is subject to a parental means test. Evidence and submissions to the inquiry were most strongly critical of the farm assets test under the Youth Allowance. Documentation submitted by the National Farmers' Federation argued

> *... despite the low returns currently being experienced by many farm families due to years of drought coupled with poor commodity prices, and the Asian crisis, many of them still have great difficulty accessing the Austudy/Youth Allowance due to the very capital intensive nature of modern farming. In other words, the Assets test continues to discriminate against farm families.*
>
> *The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Reference Committee inquiry on the impact of the assets test on farming families in 1995 found the assets test was:*
>
> > *'an inappropriate policy instrument that does not take into account the nature of farm assets and their relationship with income. In essence, the current assets test does not acknowledge that some farmers are assets rich but income poor and that farm assets cannot readily be liquidated without diminishing the viability of the farming unit.'*
>
> *It was estimated by Department of Primary Industries and Energy and the Department of Employment, Education and Training at the time that 5400 students, who would otherwise have been eligible to receive AUSTUDY on the basis of income alone, were excluded because of the assets test* (Grimson 1999, page 4).
>
> *A lot of parents pull their children out of school after Year 10 because they can no longer afford to educate their children, even with the Government assistance that is currently available. This is especially the case with families on properties who need the children at home to help run the property* (public meeting in Boulia Qld).

Recommendations received

Early childhood education

The inquiry was told that much greater provision of early childhood education is needed in rural and remote areas. The Queensland branch of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association recommended

- *that a range of early childhood programs and services be available to support children and families who live in rural and remote areas.*

- *that there be an ongoing commitment to maintaining funding for rural and remote mobile units providing Early Childhood programs and services* (ICPA Qld submission, page 2)

Senior secondary schooling

To enable students to stay on at school after the compulsory years, suggestions were made for enhancing the accessibility and affordability of senior secondary schooling. In Queensland, for example, few rural secondary schools offer Years 11 and 12.

> *Government provided hostels are needed in rural centres to accommodate secondary students during the weekdays so that they can return home on weekends. This strategy would have several benefits – social contact with other students, greater curriculum breadth and choice provided by the bigger school population as well as greater direct support from teachers working with students* (Queensland Teachers' Union submission, page 1).

Remote Indigenous communities

The need to make schools available in larger remote Indigenous communities was addressed in evidence.

> *Alternate forms of educating on the communities so that it isn't necessary for students to leave their homes. This is one of the models being worked on ... mixed-mode multi-campus model, which is where you have various modes of getting the course material in front of the students. Some of it might be correspondence, some electronically-based through computer contacts and things like video conferencing* (Peter Toyne, Shadow Minister for Education, Darwin hearing).

Transport

For students who do or could travel to school daily the problem can be the absence of a school bus or any public transport.

> *Bus route allocation needs to reflect local needs and circumstances more closely, and be less 'formula' driven. Decision-making should take into account the size of properties, more direct routes to reduce travel time for students, free access to school buses for school age students attending other education locations and procedures for extending bus routes when required* (YRC Survey Report page 62).

Distance education

A number of submissions called for additional subsidies to be provided to families schooling their children at home.

> *ICPA (Aust) recommends the provision of a GIPSSACC [Geographically Isolated Parent's School Supervisors and Child Carer] Allowance in recognition of the essential role played by home tutors in Distance Education delivery. Distance Education today is a demanding role for the home tutor. It is essentially the job of a teacher, without the training or remuneration and usually included with the daily tasks of an isolated mother eg bookkeeping, cooking, helping on the property* (ICPA Australia submission, page 8).

> *Students enrolled in distance education need access to one workstation per family with a modem and printer and individual software licences. This is much more expensive to set up than the concept of a computer room or individual computers on a Local Area Network (LAN) in a school environment. The Federal Government needs to consider some sort of subsidy scheme or grant to provide access to this technology for remote and isolated families, similar to the Homestead Video Scheme of the 1970s when these families had no access to television* (Open Access College SA submission, page 1).

At the same time the inquiry was warned against disregarding the continued importance of inter-personal contact in every child's education.

> *The importance of daily home-schooling communication in distance education should remain a high priority when delivering education provision across vast distances. Enhancements such as e-mail and computer delivered learning offer significant opportunities to improve response time in the teaching learning process, but oral communication for students and home tutors who have limited social contact with others, is a high priority for isolated families.*

> *Face to face contact is also a high priority for isolated students, who by their location, spend so much time living and learning in their isolated contexts. It is also essential for parents and home tutors who rely on the reassurance that comes from opportunities to see their children socially interacting with others in face to face situations. Technology improvements should be seen as possible enhancements to distance learning and must not be considered as a replacement for face to face contact* (Priority Country Area Program – N-W Qld submission, pages 4-5).

> *The Itinerant Teacher Service in SA is invaluable and consideration to its expansion must be addressed by the Open Access College and the Education Dept* (ICPA SA submission, page 10).

Another initiative to provide face-to-face teaching for isolated students and support for parent educators is 'VISE'. Approximately 250 Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education, most of whom are retired teachers, are available at the request of parents who undertake to provide accommodation and full board for a period, usually, of six weeks. VISE receives no government funding but is supported by rural community fund-raising events such as the Gympie

Country Music Muster and covers volunteers' travel costs (Marion Kossatz, VISE, Canberra hearing).

It was also put to the inquiry that more recognition and support for home tutors is required. Respondents to the YRC survey proposed a number of related recommendations.

> *A home tutor allowance or rebate for families when one parent is required to teach the children or to employ a governess or supervisor to deliver the Distance Education curriculum.*
>
> *Reimbursement to parents for all costs associated with Distance Education including travel and accommodation to attend cluster days, mini-schools and sporting camps.*
>
> *Development of multi-age curriculum for Distance Education, to enable home tutors or supervisors to work with different age children in the schoolroom.*
>
> *Home tutors or supervisors should be provided with annual in-services.*
>
> *An accreditation and training system for parents, governesses and supervisors involved in the delivery of Distance Education curriculum.*
>
> *Recognition and professional development for home tutors to deliver Distance Education* (Survey Report pages 61, 64, 66 and 70).

Financial assistance

With respect to the need for reform of Commonwealth financial assistance for rural families, a number of submissions argued for an increase in the boarding allowance under Assistance for Isolated Children.

> *The SAISB recommends that boarding allowances provided by the Commonwealth and State governments be increased and the formulae used to determine these grants be reviewed to provide more equitable access to boarding as a choice of education for more rural and remote families (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 13).*
>
> *ICPA believes that the Assistance for Isolated Children must be linked to the average boarding fee, not to inflation or the CPI, because at the moment that's negative. Boarding fees certainly don't go down. They only go up* (Megan McNicholl, National President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Canberra hearing).

ICPA Queensland argued for

> *... the provision of a GST free education. Isolated families, who have no choice but to educate their children at boarding schools/hostels, experience many emotional and financial hardships, including*

separation of the family, adverse weather conditions and fluctuating commodity prices, to ensure their children can complete their education. Unless food and travelling costs to sporting commitments and school-specific functions are GST free, the increased costs of these essentially core curricula activities may place boarding schools/hostels beyond the reach of these isolated students and their families.

[Also] the provision of a realistic Distance Education Allowance, to help defray the costs of educating geographically isolated students at home (ICPA Qld submission, pages 2 and 4).

Recommendations for reform of the Youth Allowance for eligible senior secondary and tertiary students focused on the Assets Test.

NFF's current policy does not call for the complete abolition of the assets test. However, NFF is of the view that business related assets of farmers or other small business owners should be exempt. These assets cannot be readily liquidated without diminishing the future viability of the business and incurring large transaction costs.

It has been estimated that if the 75% discount [promised by Deputy Prime Minister Anderson in February 1996 but yet to be implemented] for farm business related assets is introduced, an additional 2500 students from farm families would become eligible for Austudy/Youth Allowance ...

[If the discount] was extended to small business in addition to farmers ... the total number of additional students who would benefit from this initiative would be 3125, and cost a maximum of $21.6 million (Grimson 1999, pages 5-6 in National Farmers' Federation submission).

4. Schooling quality

> *... the education of the child shall be directed to (a) the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential ...* (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 29.1).

In this chapter
- Curriculum
- Staff
- Facilities
- Information technology
- Other learning opportunities
- Recommendations received

The key quality issues arising from the Youth Research Centre survey related to subject choice, education delivery (both teacher and technology issues) and resource provision (Survey Report page 19). Access issues also significantly affect quality.

> *[C]onstraints on after-school activities or on homework time because of transport requirements may limit the nature of the educational experience for students. As schools increasingly require parental provision of resources, texts and fees (fixed or 'voluntary'), the pressure of costs associated with accessing education in rural and remote Australia is transmitted into the learning environment* (YRC Survey Report page 32).

Curriculum

Students throughout rural and remote Australia were critical of the restricted range of subjects available to them in their country schools.

> *We haven't really got very much subjects. When I was on a TAFE course I picked Building and Constructions. I really wanted to do it. But they put me in Office Skills and I've got to put up with it. They didn't even give me a reason* (student meeting in Brewarrina NSW).

> *We have less teachers because we don't have so many students and then we don't have enough subject choices and then if we choose them we don't get them, and if we do get them we have problems with them anyway. We have to do them by ourselves* (student meeting in Walgett NSW).

Smaller schools that try to cover a wider range of subjects on a standard teacher establishment may need to reduce face-to-face teaching hours to compensate.

> *With the smaller classes teachers can't be allocated a lot of time to spend with them. For geography in Year 11, we had four lessons a week*

and now we've got three and with the timetable changes it's going to be cut down to two face to face lessons a week which is just not enough for a two-unit subject (student meeting in Walgett NSW).

Lack of subject choice as an issue for parents, teachers and students at secondary schools in communities under 10,000 - % of respondents

An issue for	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
Parents and teachers	17%	-	18%	45%	19%	9%	19%
Students	26%	33%	30%	38%	28%	20%	34%

Source: YRC Survey Report page 41.

On the other hand, smaller classes were appreciated for the opportunities they offer for one-on-one teaching.

I like the smaller classes because the teachers can give you plenty of attention. In the senior school the classes are like 5, 8, 10, 11 and 12. In English the classes are about 14 (student meeting in Nhulunbuy NT).

I actually went down there [to Perth] for Year 9 to boarding school and I thought it was quite different. The boarding part was quite fun, but the school teachers didn't have time for the kids and didn't really worry about you that much, especially compared to up here with such small classes (student meeting in Kununurra WA).

Although some additional subjects are available through distance education, many felt that this learning mode was either unsuitable for the subject or would not work for them.

Correspondence subjects are difficult to handle and cope with because there's not much contact with the teachers. We can't get extra help from teachers in the school so we're basically on our own. I'm doing Engineering Science by correspondence and when I have questions there aren't any teachers in the school who are qualified to teach it (student meeting in Moree NSW).

The problem with correspondence is that it does make the subjects more difficult. I wanted to take on economics but I was pretty much talked out of it because of the lack of support. There's only so much that you can understand through a phone line (student meeting in Nhulunbuy NT).

The inquiry heard criticism of the quality of Aboriginal Studies curricula.

We have Aboriginal Studies and we don't know anything about our culture. They don't get no elders to come in and talk to us. All we do is watch silly little videos. And some things that aren't even involved with our culture. No Aboriginal Education Worker participates in Aboriginal Studies. I think we need an Aboriginal teacher in the school who can teach us about our culture (student meeting in Brewarrina NSW).

Some students felt that information technology is poorly taught due to inadequate equipment and inexperienced teachers.

> *We've got the computers at the school but we're not allowed to use them. We have 3 classrooms full – there must be about 40 including in the library. The Computer Studies classes use them – but they have really out of date textbooks. Most people are computer-illiterate. The only people that know are people who own their own computers. There are students who are really gifted with what they do with computers, but they're not allowed to use them and experiment. I learnt more about computers in the school holidays than I did in the whole of last year at school. The teachers aren't really trained to teach computers. Most don't really know how to use the internet at all* (student meeting in Moree NSW).

In WA the inquiry was told that 70% of the Year 12 geography course requires a study of the south-west Perth metropolitan area. North-west schools and communities need to fundraise to send the Year 12 students to Perth so that they can observe the geography they are required to study.

Students expressed enthusiasm and pride in their school when popular courses are well-taught.

> *At Port Lincoln High School we can do music from Year 8 right through to Year 12. We can record our own music at school because we have a recording studio. We have an Aboriginal Nunga band too and we got a national award for our music this year. We will also be making a video clip at the school* (student meeting in Port Lincoln SA).

The introduction of vocational courses into the curriculum, often in co-operation with local TAFEs, was very well received.

> *Vocational education developments were seen by some teachers as an important curriculum strategy to overcome some of the limitations caused by distance and location. With the connections being developed within the local business community for work placement, students are able to gain training qualifications without having to leave the community* (YRC Survey Report page 42).

In Tasmania, for example, schools are developing courses that are linked into the National Training Modules.

> *The commitment of industry (aquaculture) which is focused on its community has meant we have been able to establish innovative enterprise and vocational programs which have been recognised nationally ... At our school, 75% leave for Hobart [for senior secondary schooling] and 25% stay to do VET courses in hospitality and aquaculture* (Tasmanian teacher quoted in YRC Survey Report page 43).

The value of engaging interested students in TAFE programs even during the compulsory years of schooling is now being accepted.

> *The new policy is that TAFE is able to provide access to students at any age to their programs, and it's anticipated in the broadening of the options in those post-compulsory years that TAFE will play a part within that provision as much as schools will. We now have a range of Vocational Education and Training programs that are now coming down to Years 9 and 10 and implied in that is access to TAFE programs, TAFE facilities* (Don Tyrer, General Manager, School Programs Division, Victorian Department of Employment, Education and Training, Melbourne hearing).

Staff

In all States and the Northern Territory one consistent theme was that rural and remote schools are difficult to staff. Disincentives affecting both recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote schools include isolation and the cost of travel, the cost of living including higher telephone, food and power costs, poor quality and often expensive housing and limited opportunities to participate in professional development with resulting impacts on promotional opportunities.

Disincentives

Teachers responding to the Youth Research Centre survey identified personal costs as very significant and also reported lack of access to professional development as a real disincentive.

Disincentives for teachers in communities under 10,000 - % of respondents

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
Personal costs	32%	38%	26%	30%	28%	16%	37%
Professional development	63%	23%	42%	38%	41%	61%	41%

Source: YRC Survey Report pages 58 and 59.

> *Some (but not all) [teachers] reported that they had been unable or found it difficult to continue with further tertiary study due to their remote location. Others felt out of touch with the latest teaching issues because of decreased opportunities for outside examination marking at senior levels or because of decreased contact and networking with teachers in the same subject area from other schools* (YRC Survey Report page 60).

Turnover

Rural and remote schools have a higher staff turnover rate than metropolitan schools (Tomlinson 1994). Staff retention rates can be an important determinant of the quality of the education being delivered to rural and remote

children. High turnover of predominantly inexperienced teachers also has other costs.

> *Rural and remote schools provide the training ground for large numbers of young teachers who then relocate to coastal areas, leaving rural and remote schools with the financial burden of training the next intake. Turnover of staff in coastal areas is small by comparison so the associated training budget drain is less, and at the same time their intake of staff comprises predominantly teachers fully trained and returning from service in rural and remote areas* (Priority Country Area Program – N-W Qld submission, pages 3-4).

Reasonable stability in the staffing of rural and remote schools is necessary for the following reasons, the inquiry was told by the Queensland Independent Education Union.

> *Both teachers and students benefit from stability and continuity in program delivery. Teachers who stay one year or less in a school experience difficulties in implementing programs through the lack of opportunity to modify the program to suit the changing needs of the students and the school. Teachers are [normally] continually trialing and modifying programs from year to year based on their experiences from the previous year. If teachers are constantly changing in rural and remote schools, students are disadvantaged in the learning activities they experience.*
>
> *Schools where staff constantly changes lack a sense of 'community'. Stability in staffing can result in an overall feeling in the school of common purpose and belonging thus providing an atmosphere where teaching and learning can flourish.*
>
> *Teachers develop skills through a continuum of experiences. Teachers are learners who thrive in a stable environment. If teachers constantly move from one school to another the continuity of their development as teachers is interrupted.*
>
> *Teachers who move from school to school ... are disadvantaged in terms of career development and promotion [as] continued breaks in continuity of employment results in an interruption to skill acquisition ...* (Qld Independent Education Union submission, pages 9-10).

Students throughout Australia were critical of the inexperience and high turnover of their teachers.

> *The situation is that first year out teachers come to Bourke as their first appointment. A lot of the teachers here, Bourke is their only experience. Last year we got three new executive [principals, deputy principals and head teachers are 'executives'] at the same time. And for the HSC marking our teachers aren't released to do it because they can't get a casual to come out and relieve them. So only one of our teachers has*

> *ever marked the HSC. No other teachers have ever marked it and so they lack the experience to prepare us for HSC exams* (student meeting in Bourke NSW).

Recruitment and retention difficulties mean that a disproportionate number of country teachers are inexperienced and English as a Second Language (ESL), maths, science and information technology (IT) staff, in particular, are in short supply.

> *Small rural schools have always had a problem with finding then keeping specialist staff. A looming teacher shortage will exacerbate the problem; however, a lack of Maths, Science and Information Technology teachers has had an impact in our area already. Consequently in all rural schools you have staff teaching out of their faculty areas. This cannot be for the overall good of the student* (Trangie Central School NSW submission).

Many schools also have difficulty offering music and other arts subjects.

> *At Cowell last year we had a perfect example of this for a senior secondary student in that she wanted to study music in Year 12. Well she was the only student studying the clarinet over the telephone from Adelaide one lesson a week, but she had nothing to look at because the Sharevision didn't work and of course as part of it she was required to play as part of an orchestra. Very difficult to do by yourself. So her parents had to drive her because she didn't have her licence yet, to drive her to Whyalla so there was over 100kms there and over 100kms back and even though she was year 12 she missed all of her other subjects that day whenever she had to go to Whyalla so she had to spend extra time weekends. If it weren't for the teachers who used to teach her those extra things on weekends she would not – and she did, she passed year 12 at a huge expense to her parents because we couldn't afford to pay them CAP [Country Areas Program] all the time because our CAP had been reduced as well and she was one student looking for one subject, but she had a right to it the same as everybody else* (Jan Burton, Principal of Cowell Area School, Port Lincoln SA hearing).

High staff turnover creates particular difficulties in maintaining continuity in offering of languages and sports (YRC Survey Report page 50).

Incentives

Government education departments offer varying incentives and compensations to teachers willing to move to the country. Incentives include additional 'points' earned towards preferential transfers, additional days of annual leave, a locality allowance and subsidised housing. In the NT, for example, teachers qualify for a 'Professional's Isolation Allowance' of between $330 and $1,320 annually. In Tasmania the locality allowance varies between $325 and $2,555 per annum and in Victoria between $169 and $439 per annum. However

> *Rural and remote teaching staff suggest that the existing strategies only partially mitigate the conditions under which they operate* (public meeting in Weipa Qld).

> *The current incentives [in South Australia] reward the teachers who want to be in the country and have had little impact on increasing the number of applicants for country positions – both teaching and leadership. Incentives may need to include free housing, access to a car, significant pay differences and access to free tertiary study* (Open Access College SA submission, page 2).

> *The current incentive scheme [in NSW] may attract people to rural areas but once they are there the incentive is to leave rather than remain, even for just an extra year or so* (anonymous submission).

Incentive schemes are much more limited – both geographically and as to quantum – in the non-government school sector. In the Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese in NSW, for example

> *We have offered them incentives. We paid their final year of HECS. We offer them $500 extra in their first year, $750 in the second and $1 000 in the third. We also allow them to take two additional long weekends throughout the year* (Ken Rodwell, Wilcannia-Forbes Catholic Education Office, Brewarrina NSW hearing).

Teacher training

Dr David McSwan, Director of the Rural Education Research and Development Centre at James Cook University in Townsville Qld, advised the inquiry

> *While incentives are important, many studies (including overseas) have demonstrated that the most effective approach is to recruit trainee professionals from rural and remote areas. Accordingly, it is recommended that Universities be funded to provide for teacher education programs which would provide community-based training and target local mature-age entrants* (Dr David McSwan submission, page 1).

James Cook University has established a Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) to implement this approach.

> *RATEP is an intersystemic partnership comprising James Cook University, Education Queensland, Far North Queensland Institute of TAFE, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities ...*
>
> *Students commence with a two-year component in TAFE, graduating with a Diploma in Education. A further three years of study through JCU qualifies students for a Bachelor of Education degree. RATEP students study the same subjects and complete the same core requirements as on-campus B.Ed. students. All 'lectures' are provided through computer-based interactive multimedia (CD-ROM) courseware or on the World Wide Web. Tutorials are held by teleconferences and WebBoard discussion groups, supervised by an on-site teacher-coordinator (tutor) ...*
>
> *RATEP commenced in 1990. To date, it has graduated 69 qualified teachers, which is 26% of the Indigenous teachers in Queensland. RATEP has a completion rate significantly higher than other Indigenous teacher education programs: approx 85%. Students attribute much of this success to the fact that they can study in their home communities, in the midst of extensive family and community support networks. Apart from a two-week orientation period and the third year school experience practicum, all study is done at the RATEP site.*
>
> *Most RATEP graduates work in community schools and schools in remote locations, but a number have taken positions in regional and metropolitan areas. Four RATEP graduates have become school principals and others have positions of responsibility such as Teacher-in-Charge* (Dr David McSwan, Rural Education Research and Development Centre, James Cook University Qld, submission, pages 3-4).

Similar models for training local Indigenous teachers in their home communities have been introduced by Batchelor Institute in the NT, Notre Dame University in Broome WA and the NSW Department of Education and Training in Boggabilla NSW (Community-based Indigenous Teacher Education Program or 'CITEP').

Most education departments have begun discussions about the need for specific rural recruitment strategies and the need to include information about rural and remote schools in teacher training qualifications (Robert Laird, Australian Education Union (NT), Darwin hearing). The Catholic Education Office in WA has compiled a video and training program called 'Kimberley Calling' which provides a real picture of remote school communities and outlines the attractions and the challenges of remote school teaching. Kimberley-based teachers assist in an information session for new recruits and participate in the selection process. Since the development of 'Kimberley Calling' in 1998, 18 teachers have been recruited to the Kimberley. After one year, 17 were still working in the region. Similarly in Queensland

> *The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and ICPA – Qld Inc. have developed a partnership program for QUT student teachers to undertake practicums at schools in rural and remote areas of Queensland. This program enables student teachers to gain first hand experience teaching in small schools, along with the opportunity to develop an understanding of living and working in rural/isolated communities. One of the significant outcomes of this program has been that many of the students (the majority of whom are from the city) have applied for and accepted teaching appointments to schools in rural and remote communities* (ICPA Australia submission, page 14).

Also in Queensland

> *The University of Southern Queensland includes a mandatory course component 'Teaching in Small Rural Communities', along with the requirement for all Bachelor of Education students to complete their final practicum in a small rural school and the option to complete additional experiences such as the Isolated Children's Project and the Isolated Schools' Project* (ICPA Australia submission, page 14).

Professional development

The difficulties of offering professional development opportunities to rural and remote teachers include costs of travel to the large regional centre or capital city for training and the costs of employing casual replacement teachers, if they can be located. In this context the inquiry was pleased to hear of cross-sectoral co-operation in South Australia and elsewhere.

> *I think that in rural centres the availability of professional development is something that all schools have been able to participate in. I think the collegiality between non-government and government schools in rural areas is considerably better than it is in the urban areas* (Barry Morrison, Association of Non-Government Education Employees SA, Adelaide hearing).

Facilities

Students were particularly critical of the library and sporting facilities at their country schools.

> *We don't have enough textbooks and what we do have are badly damaged. Two of us have Business Studies class from 3 'til 7 and at the moment we can't have textbooks each because it's our last and it costs too much to order two just for us. Our teacher has to photocopy pages out of the book and then give them to us. And that's the same with Legal Studies too* (student meeting in Bourke NSW).

> *All we have is an open basketball court and a netball court which is a personal hazard. The grass is growing through the court and there's*

glass over the court and both courts are cracked ... If it's raining, we miss out on sport. If it has rained, people can slip over (student meeting in Brewarrina NSW).

We want a swimming pool. Some schools have pools and we need one here because it is so hot. We don't have a public swimming pool at Halls Creek. The creeks are 10 kilometres out of town. The swimming pools are at the caravan park and at the hotels and we can't use them (student meeting in Halls Creek WA).

Information technology

More than anybody else isolated kids are ready - because of their independence and responsibility - to take advantage of this technology and they can't (public meeting in Bourke NSW).

The potential of technology for reducing rural and remote students' isolation and lack of access to information is enormous. Currently due to high costs, technology is widening the gap between students in city locations and rural and remote locations (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 20).

Parent, teacher and student responses to the YRC survey revealed

- almost all students had access to computers at school
- the majority had access to the internet at school
- many had access to a computer at home
- far fewer students had access to the internet at home (Survey Report page 52).

Information technologies offer exciting opportunities for delivering education to very remote and isolated students. Video conferencing, for example, can enable very small and isolated student cohorts to participate directly in classes delivered to a larger group in a larger centre.

For example, in north eastern Victoria, one or two students in a small rural school are able to learn a language that is being taught at another school. The student is part of the class and can interact directly with the teacher (YRC Survey Report page 53).

All States and Territories have established plans for the development of information and communications technology in government schools. They include goals for achieving a required ratio of students per computer or computers per school within a set period and providing access to the internet for all schools.

However, there are significant differences among States and Territories in their strategies, including the level of resources committed. They range from relatively minimal plans that provide basic ISDN quality connections to

more substantial plans including comprehensive professional development programs for teachers.

> *The introduction of IT in schools has been characterised by inadequate levels of training and professional development, technical support and occupational health and safety information. There has been competition for scarce resources in schools and a haphazard approach to whole school IT development* (Qld Independent Education Union submission, page 11).

The inquiry was told that, generally, rural non-government schools are struggling to keep up with information technology advances in government schools.

> *[C]ountry non-government schools such as ours are also endeavouring to keep up with the developments in technology. However, in most cases we are doing it alone and on very tight budgets ... [U]nfortunately, we do not have a big organisation such as a Government body that can inject considerable funds into this particular area over a short period as is the case in the Government schools. Our development in this area will thus be a far longer process and, therefore, in some ways places our students at a disadvantage compared to our Government school colleagues. This disadvantage, of course, would be far more pronounced in the more remote areas of the State* (St Mary's College Gunnedah NSW submission, page 2).

Despite the many positive programs, access to appropriate technology infrastructure and maintenance support remains problematic for many rural and remote students in Australia. The inquiry received similar complaints from Queensland

> *[T]here are significant numbers of rural communities and nearly the total number of remotely located families that receive no or very poor standards of service. It is estimated that only 12,000 of Australia's 120,000 productive farms have access to the internet and then often with high costs and poor service quality.*
>
> *Currently, Australian rural and remote areas are characterised by limited access to Internet Service Providers (ISPs), higher telephone costs and very slow internet access speed if available at all.*
>
> *Within the state education system of Queensland there has been significant improvement in the provision of internet services to the rural school site through the Connect Ed initiative. Alas, no program has attempted to address the accessibility of technology for remotely isolated students* (Priority Country Area Program Qld State Council submission, pages 5 and 6).

Victoria

Technology support is severely hindered by the following factors

- *access to service providers who are not only reasonable in cost but are also effective and reliable in the provision of their support*
- *the cost of internet access in rural and remote Australia is far more inhibitive than our city counterparts*
- *computer expertise in servicing and back up support of stand alone and networked computers, within the local or regional environment is sorely lacking and hence, leads to exorbitant costs or long 'down times'* (St Mary's School Swan Hill Vic submission, page 1).

Western Australia

With the increasing use of technology in our modern world the families and children in rural and remote Australia are being left further and further behind. They do not even have the basic equivalent services of their city counterparts. Many people in remote Australia still have a power system based in generators. To install a fully operational solar power system can cost in the vicinity of $20-30,000 and the Government rebate is for a total amount of $8,000.

At times the basic phone service does not work and people can be without communication for several days. Many of the parents themselves are not computer literate and they are trying to teach their children to be computer literate. There needs to be far more training in technology in the rural areas at an affordable cost to the participants (Raelene Hall, Neds Creek Station via Meekatharra WA, submission).

Technology is a focus for our school but we are extremely disadvantaged. Even though we receive adequate funding there just does not exist the support service needed. An example, we are setting up a school computer network so that we might be able to provide Internet facilities into classrooms. Existing staff members have limited expertise. Contractors/computer providers can install the system but to maintain the system we will be floundering. We learn as we go. Metropolitan schools have a number of support people they can use (Ed dept and private companies), all of whom are keen to offer competitive quotes for such service (Steve Oakley, Broome Primary School WA, submission).

South Australia

Videoconferencing for staff training and development has huge potential, but little has been done to broaden the concept in country areas. We believe this is due to the lack of technological infrastructure and political will to hasten the process.

Technology in our rural area is abysmal. Our school has very limited access to the internet which restricts our students from learning a whole range of IT such as web pages and online learning and research. Our

access to the internet is very slow and can take up to 20 minutes to download one item required for research.

We lack technical back up, training and equipment. Training teachers to become expert in this area is based on personal time and expense travelling to Adelaide. The funding is not available to incorporate those who are experts in the community (Booleroo Centre High School SA submission, pages 3 and 4).

And New South Wales

[U]ntil Telstra extends the ISDN lines beyond Tottenham and Bourke the kids that are on distance education will always be at a technological disadvantage. They have the computers, they have the hardware, they have the software, and they have the teachers. We have the infrastructure at school but we do not have the telephone lines to support it. And that is an enormous disadvantage to the distance education kids. It is frustrating that the education infrastructure is there but the technology infrastructure isn't. If you are on a radiophone - they have trialed this in South Australia - they can run on 320 bytes per minute. It would take you about three days to download a sentence (public meeting in Bourke NSW).

Telstra advised the inquiry

Telstra is a major investor in new services to rural and regional Australia. Telstra is spending some $12 billion in capital programs over the next 3 years. Approximately $3 billion of the total capital program is being spent in the provision of new services to rural and regional Australia. Telstra's investment per customer in areas outside capital cities is nearly 50% more than for metropolitan customers.

One of the perceptions of rural educational disadvantage also relates to access to higher bandwidth services that can be used to access the Internet, email and other data applications.

Telstra has made significant new investment in access technologies to ensure that all areas of Australia can now reasonably access the Internet and send and receive high speed data ... Telstra is able to make available a basic rate ISDN service to over 96% of the Australian population on demand ... Even more importantly, Australian rural ISDN users do not get charged more than their urban counterparts ... Telstra has also invested in a national high speed Internet service powered by satellite (Telstra submission, pages 2 and 3).

Under the Universal Service Obligation (USO) Telstra is required to provide minimum services to a high proportion of its customers.

Telstra's USO Plan sets out the minimum level of service that it will provide nationally. This is currently defined as a voice grade network

providing a minimum transmission speed of 2400bps. The Government has recently included a digital data service obligation in the USO arrangements to ensure that general digital data services and special digital data services are reasonably accessible to all Australians on an equitable basis, wherever they reside or carry on business. General digital data services provide a digital data capability broadly comparable to that provided by a data channel with a transmission speed of 64 kilobits per second (kbps) supplied as part of the basic rate ISDN service. General digital data services are required to be reasonably accessible to at least 96% of the Australian population upon request. For the remainder of the Australian population who cannot access ISDN, the obligation is to provide an on-demand one-way digital data service comparable to a transmission speed of 64kbps (ie. special digital data services) (Telstra submission, page 5).

Other learning opportunities

Metropolitan students take for granted their many opportunities to participate in sporting competitions, cultural and other performances, excursions, university visits and visiting speakers. Rural and remote area students and their schools and families struggle to provide just a few such opportunities each year. Parents' and Citizens' committee fund-raising, family contributions and the Commonwealth Country Areas Program all strain to offer extra-curricula educational and experiential opportunities to country students. Almost every such opportunity involves long hours and sometimes days of travel.

One of the most crippling costs to parents is that associated with excursions and sporting opportunities. In order for our students to take advantage of enriching learning experiences beyond the classroom we have to travel large distances. This requires expensive bus hire and accommodation (if overnight stays are required). The cost of providing the breadth of educational opportunities similar to those of city students is far greater, and therefore, places rural and remote students at a significant disadvantage. The most significant factors – cost and distance (Michael Horsley, Principal of St Mary's College Gunnedah NSW, submission).

Broadening students' outlook in relatively restricted rural environments and giving them access to educational opportunities often imposes an unfair financial burden on parents of rural students. State museums, art galleries, libraries, parliaments and large industries are all located in capital cities. Students of excellence tend to find that the State level of competition, such as sport, is located in Sydney. Wollongbar Public School does 2 major excursions with the Year 5 & 6 excursion costing $300 plus for each student. There are no government subsidies to assist these parents gain equality access of education for their son/daughter (Wollongbar NSW P&C Association submission, pages 1-2).

Many students described the impacts on them of remoteness from capital city based learning and competition opportunities.

> *Most of the educational events occur in more heavily populated areas and therefore students sometimes miss what would otherwise be available. For example we miss HSC seminars and conferences and sporting events as well* (student meeting in Walgett NSW).

> *We have to travel to Brisbane for competitions like 'Tournament of Minds'. It is a lot harder for us than for students in Brisbane. They don't have to worry about whether they can raise funds for travel or whether the school will cover travel costs* (student meeting in Mt Isa Qld).

> *When we need to go to Adelaide for our subjects it costs us a lot of money. The students in Adelaide can go and watch Parliament sitting, but if we want to go then we have to pay an airfare of $202 and then accommodation. It ends up costing $500 for 2 days there. We don't get very much funding to cover the costs so mainly we have to pay ourselves. Sometimes we have to go to Adelaide for plays for our English subjects because there is no live theatre here in Port Lincoln* (student meeting in Port Lincoln SA).

> *It's a major issue because of the location. We are pretty disadvantaged. I'd like to talk about regional athletics. If we go away to regional or zone athletics the school pays for it. But if we go away to State – to Sydney – the school doesn't take any responsibility. It's because of lack of money and it's a small school. It's up to us students and our parents to raise the money. The school does fund-raising and the P&C helps. But they don't raise much* (student meeting in Bourke NSW).

> *When a team has to go away a teacher has to go with them. And when they get to a higher level they have to stay overnight. And there aren't that many casual teachers to take over. So they don't take us away as much as they could. They shouldn't take away HSC teachers which they did last year which disadvantaged the HSC students* (student meeting in Bourke NSW).

The importance of such opportunities was repeatedly emphasised.

> *... activities such as theatre, music, are limited. Recently a group of Chamber Musicians visited the island [Palm Island, Qld] and the children's fascination and interest in the stringed instruments was amazing. They have only ever seen guitars. There has been very limited exposure to learning musical instruments. Another example of limited experience due to isolation is this. A young teacher entered her Year 2 class in the Townsville Eisteddfod – a first ever entrant from Palm Island in its 50 years of operation. The set poem was about a train. The teacher had to take them to the train station in Townsville to actually see a train so they could get the real idea of what noises trains made* (St Michael's School, Palm Island Qld, submission, page 3).

Recommendations received

Approaches to education provision

A different approach to the provision of rural and remote education – one which emphasises quality over cost – was urged upon the inquiry.

> *Funding models need to de-emphasise population size. Transporting children in rural and remote areas for educational, cultural and sporting activities requires hiring a bus whether the children number 10 or 40. Transporting an artist to work with children in remote areas costs heavily, yet is just as important for a small school of 10 students as it is for a larger school of 500 students. While the larger school may well have the capacity to fund raise, the small school battles to raise the funds necessary to enable the children to enjoy the same provision* (Priority Country Area Program – N-W Qld submission, page 3).

> *Governments should also ensure that quality education programs can be delivered to schools in rural areas and not just consider the means to do so. Such programs could include delivering guest speakers, cultural and sporting programs etc that are subsidised* (Wollongbar NSW P&C Association submission, page 2).

Cross-sectoral co-operation and regional clustering were suggested as ways to overcome restrictions on subject choice.

> *There should be more co-operation between schools in the region. They should work together to ensure that north-west Queensland keeps up with other regions in the State. Funding should be provided to enable schools to work together more closely* (student meeting in Mt Isa Qld).

> *I think that cluster models are becoming more and more used. I know in part of the district that I'm working in we're sharing more with the schools that are within about a 50 to 80 kilometre distance with us and actually moving teachers and students occasionally across those distances and sending students to central locations for shared programs of all sorts. Some of those shared programs are ones that we do with TAFE and others are ones that we do. For example, we run an alternative program for students who are not successful at school, particularly middle school-aged children who are still under compulsion, but are finding it very difficult to actually attend and participate positively. So we run a central alternative program for those students and transport the students to that program for a couple of days a week* (Sally Paterson, Murray Lands District Leaders Group SA, Adelaide hearing).

> *Expansion of curriculum breadth through co-operative efforts between all providers: schools (government and non-government), Distance Education centres, Universities and TAFE Colleges* (YRC Survey Report page 64).

There was very strong support for the retention and expansion of the excellent Country Areas Program which is funded by the Commonwealth through the government and independent school systems in each State and the Northern Territory. For example, the South Australian Independent Schools Board recommended

> *[That] the Country Areas Program be retained as a valuable strategy to assist rural schools to address issues raised by this national inquiry into rural and remote education* (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 9).

The South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment recommended

> *That the funding for the current Country Areas Program (CAP) be substantially increased to enable enhanced access by rural students to services and cultural and sporting events in larger regional centres and cities* (submission, page 18).

The Queensland branch of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association argued

- *that the Priority Country Area Program (PCAP) in Queensland be maintained in its current intersystemic and community-based format.*
- *that the Country Areas Program (CAP), including PCAP in Queensland, be maintained as a separately identified and funded Commonwealth Targeted program within the area of "Special Learning Needs", as it is the only program (in the above scheme) which addresses the unique needs of students who are geographically isolated* (ICPA Qld submission, page 5).

Information technology

The need for additional resourcing for information technology programs and provision was also raised.

> *That a three year funded program be established to provide all rural and remote students with access to laptop computer technology to support distance education, face to face teaching and the development of IT skills and knowledge comparable to students living in large metropolitan/regional centres* (SA Department of Education, Training and Employment submission, page 17).

> *Telstra needs to maintain and upgrade telecommunication infrastructure and to uphold its Universal Service Obligation to protect remote and isolated consumers. Telstra to work towards the provision of greater data speeds* (ICPA SA submission, page 8).

The South Australian Independent Schools Board recommended

[That] the Commonwealth and State governments allocate additional resources to non-government schools that will ensure equitable and reliable access in rural, remote and metropolitan regions to information technology that can be used for educational and management purposes (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 21).

ICPA Queensland argued for

- *a study [to] be conducted on the educational outcomes, social interaction and maturity for students studying many subjects via technology.*
- *professional development and technical support for teachers expected to implement current technological change in rural and remote areas be adequately funded.*
- *all students [to] acquire the skills necessary to allow them to adapt to the rapid and less predictable changes that will confront them in the future.*
- *the provision of grid power at an affordable price for all Australians irrespective of where they live. Those living in cities take technological advances for granted. Those without grid power are falling behind, as home generators do not support computer use, and allow only limited use of electrical appliances* (ICPA Qld submission, page 6).

Curriculum

To ensure a curriculum suitable for rural and remote areas ICPA Queensland called for the preparation of curriculum materials that

- *can be implemented in the full range of educational settings, including small schools, multi-age classes and the home tutoring of distance education students.*
- *can be easily adapted by teachers at Schools of Distance Education for specialised use by their students.*
- *assist students from rural and remote areas to prepare for the world of work.*
- *take into consideration the fact that many teachers in rural and remote school settings are young and inexperienced; and that they may require easy and ready access to curriculum and support materials, including planning and assessment examples* (ICPA Qld submission, page 4).

The significance of Vocational Education and Training as an alternative or supplement to academic programs for some students, as an appropriate framework within which to teach literacy and numeracy for some, including some Indigenous, students and for enhancing rural and remote students' post-school employment prospects is acknowledged in the following recommendation.

> *That a program be developed in collaboration with the states and territories and the Commonwealth Government to plan and implement strategies in Vocational Education and Training which improve access and participation for students in rural and remote communities to facilities, courses and work placement required to enable them to gain recognised industry qualifications* (SA Department of Education, Training and Employment submission, page 18).

Country students and teachers made suggestions as to how their opportunities to participate in state-wide competitions and other activities could be improved.

> *They should make State competitions more central to everywhere. They do swap it around the regions but if it's in our region it would probably be in Dubbo. I think swimming is always in Sydney. If you go to State [swimming competition] in Sydney just about everyone there is Sydney people because people from country areas just can't go, it's just too long. If the parents can't go, the kids aren't going to go by themselves. You've got to spend money going there and then you don't get proper coaches here: it's a waste of money* (student meeting in Bourke NSW).

> *The idea of DET funded excursion accommodation in Sydney came to me out of the frustration of trying to organise an excursion to Sydney for seven students, and being knocked back because the school would not send two teachers. The issue relates to the inequality between city and country schools because a Sydney teacher could take a class for a day excursion, and the school would not need to provide a second teacher* (Andrew Burn, Griffith NSW, submission).

Staff incentives

Many witnesses and submissions called for enhanced incentives to attract teachers to rural and remote schools and to encourage them to stay.

> *Incentives should include:*
> - *Reduced rent.*
> - *More money through the isolated teachers allowance to cover increased food and living expenses.*
> - *Subsidised travel to the nearest major centre once or twice a term.*
> - *Inservice and professional development should be provided in your school so that teachers are not constantly expected to travel. (We often spend more time travelling than attending the inservice)* (Qld Independent Education Union submission, quoting a member, page 13).

> *We reckon that in order to give the school some stability that the executive staff especially should be made to stay for five years instead of three to decrease the amount of turnover in that part of staff. And with the other teachers there shouldn't be more than two coming in and going out each year so that there's not so much change for the students.*

And perhaps to keep them here they should be given an incentive, like given more points. They already get points to come here but they should actually be given more because they just do it for 3 years and that's it; they don't stay for too long. So maybe if they were given more points or more money they'd be inclined to stay (student meeting in Bourke NSW).

Staff recruitment and induction

Teachers need to be adequately prepared for teaching and living in the bush. Programs like RATEP in Queensland and CITEP in NSW overcome this need to some extent by recruiting student teachers from the bush and enabling them to undertake most of their training in their own communities. For student teachers based in the cities, however, ICPA Queensland argued

- *that a rural component be written into all educational policy and programs to ensure the practicality of their implementation in rural and remote areas.*
- *that a 'rural education' component be included in pre service teacher training courses, to prepare teachers for the diversity of teaching situations in rural and remote schools.*
- *that the 'rural education' component be supported by pre-service practical experiences conducted in a diversity of teaching situations in rural and remote communities* (ICPA Qld submission, page 5).

5. Students with disabilities

> *States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community* (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 23.1).
>
> *States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system* (United Nations *Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, 1993, Rule 6).

In this chapter

- Numbers and definition
- Avoiding discrimination
- Barriers to integration
- Some programs for students with disabilities
- Recommendations received

Numbers and definition

In 1998 6.7% of Australians aged 0-9 years, 9.4% of those aged 10-14 and 8.1% of those aged 15-19 had a disability. About 5.7% of children aged 0-9 with a disability experienced consequential restrictions on 'core activities' including participation in education. The same was true of 8% of those aged 10-14 and 6.6% of those aged 15-19 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 1999, pages 58 and 59).

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) defines 'disability' to mean

(a) total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions; or
(b) total or partial loss of a part of the body; or
(c) the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or
(d) the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or
(e) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person's body; or
(f) disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or
(g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour.

Avoiding discrimination

The *Disability Discrimination Act* makes discrimination by schools against children with disabilities unlawful unless admitting or accommodating the child would cause unjustifiable hardship. Not all treatment which is different is

unlawful. It is not unlawful to establish an educational institution wholly or primarily for students with a particular disability or for a special measure to be provided to meet the special needs of a child with a disability if these steps are necessary to promote the child's human rights.

All State and Territory education policies affirm that a range of settings and services will be provided for students with disabilities including special schools, special units in regular schools and supported placement in mainstream classes. Distance education and home schooling may also be an option for students with disabilities in rural areas.

> *In seeking an inclusive education for their sons and daughters, parents are seeking a school*
> - *with a clear value orientation that welcomes all comers,*
> - *that values diversity and*
> - *that recognises its responsibility for the education of all children in the catchment area* (Family Advocacy NSW submission, page 2).

However, access to the variety of schooling available is limited by various factors, including the type of disability and geography. In 1997 the National Children's and Youth Law Centre conducted research on disability discrimination in schools. In its survey of parents, students and others, problems mentioned as specific to rural areas were

- lack of choice in schools
- distance involved if a special school or special unit was required by the student but not available in close proximity to home
- difficulty in attracting and keeping skilled teaching staff and aides in country areas
- difficulty for or reluctance of staff to access city-based training opportunities
- shortage or lack of therapists and visiting specialists
- lack of advocacy services or disability support organisations
- inequity in funding distribution formulae (Flynn 1997, page 39).

Many of these issues were also raised in hearings and submissions to the inquiry. The obligation to integrate students is frequently frustrated.

> *Integration of students is a particular problem in rural schools for the student being integrated, the classmates and staff. The lack of support staff at the district level to help with integration matters or special needs students (of all types) makes coping with these students time consuming and in many cases stressful. Students that require a great deal of care whether impaired in some sense or behaviourally difficult increase workload on the staff and will if adequate support is not forthcoming impact on the other students. To have special needs students only placed with aids for portions of their school time is disgraceful. To be told by district staff that appropriate support cannot be sent because you are low on the priority list (as we have) due to lack of support staff in your district gives teaching staff a lack of confidence in the system and*

disadvantages all students involved (Craig Luccarda, Trangie NSW, submission).

At our school we had 2 kids with intellectual disabilities but they left after Year 7 because the school could not cope with them (student meeting in Port Lincoln SA).

The inquiry was told that when integration fails students with disabilities and their families in rural and remote areas have limited choice.

Our son is intellectually able, ambulant, but has no speech as a consequence of cerebral palsy. He has other impairments because of the c.p. as well. He attended local schools in middle and upper primary but the local state high school insisted they could not meet his needs. The special school only 50 miles away refused to enrol him because he did not have an intellectual disability, a requirement for enrolment. As a consequence, in order for him to attend school at all, we had to seek enrolment in Melbourne special settings for which he was eligible. This was very difficult as accommodation is so difficult ... More than that we didn't want to send our son away. We ended up having to, and commute him twice a week to Melbourne (Patricia Henry, Victoria, submission).

Barriers to integration

The inquiry was told that departmental commitments to integration and support are often not met.

Again, often it comes down to the personal philosophy of people making the decisions themselves, you know, the principals or the district personnel. If they believe that segregated education is the way children with disabilities should be educated, they will promote that line and they will put as many barriers in the way as they can to prevent children entering the regular system. Whereas if you get a principal or district personnel who believe that they should be educated in ordinary classrooms with support, then they'll promote that line (Megan Sweeney, Disability Council of NSW, Sydney hearing).

It is the practice in a number of areas that if the school receives a level of resources that the school considers insufficient to support the child, the family is asked to collect the child for example at lunch time a number of days per week (Family Advocacy NSW submission, page 2).

Staff training

It can be difficult for rural and remote area teachers to access training in special education.

The integration of children with special needs is a feature of Catholic Schools especially St Patrick's where we have 7 Integration students enrolled out of a student population of 220. However, this does present

difficulties with greater time and planning demands placed on teachers including attendance at specialised inservicing in Melbourne (2½ hour drive) (St Patrick's School Camperdown Vic submission, page 1).

Accommodation

Failure to expedite building adjustments to accommodate students with physical disabilities – for example, to permit wheelchair access – was raised

> *We have had applications in with the Education Department for a year and a half now, to have our school modified to meet disability standards ... but the process is so slow that nothing happens. Just recently we were told that we would get the first part of the grant to get the disability toilet but it is still going to be months before that happens. And there seems to be no special provisions to get this disability access. You just have to apply like everyone else does for improvements to the school, and it is just a matter of luck I suppose, or if the department considers your thing all right they approve it. But there is no actual process which we can go through to get disability access and to get it quickly* (community meeting at Lajamanu NT).

> *One student in a region where there was supposedly a range of options for secondary education had to forgo his first choice because all of the high school classrooms were upstairs and there was no lift* (Annette Herbert, Inclusive Education Network SA, Adelaide hearing).

On the other hand, many examples of rural schools successfully modifying the facilities to include students with specific disabilities were given.

> *We have 2 kids at the school in wheelchairs. We have ramps and the drains have been fixed up so the wheels don't get stuck in them. At the primary school they have a lift for the kids in wheelchairs. The science labs have been changed so that the kids in the wheelchairs can do their pracs with the rest of us* (school meeting at Nhulunbuy NT).

> *We have a girl who is in a wheelchair. Each year that she moves through the school they modify the facilities in the school* (student meeting at Port Lincoln SA).

The inquiry heard that students with disabilities may be turned away from non-government schools in rural areas because there are no funds to make the necessary building adjustments and provide the required support.

> *The question about why are children being refused access to schools comes in. It happens in state schools as well as the private sector, but the private sector hasn't got the infrastructure of funding to support. The funding to support a child with a disability in the private sector comes from the Commonwealth unless it's derived from the actual school community out of goodwill or whatever. Any actual funding comes from the Commonwealth. It's very limited. I think the maximum amount you*

can get from the Commonwealth is about $1,000 a year or $1,200 a year to support a child and then that's it (Megan Sweeney, Disability Council of NSW, Sydney hearing).

In other cases the Catholic system struggles to provide support comparable with that available in the government school system.

The government schools seem to have a better funding arrangement which puts them in a position of being able to offer a service which is beyond that of St Joseph's. Such a situation disadvantages those children who wish to have a Catholic Education along with the specialised care required for them to reach their full potential (John Polglase, St Joseph's Catholic School, Kununurra WA hearing).

Exceptional pupils, those with learning difficulties, physical difficulties, emotional difficulties and the gifted and talented have programs developed for them by a special education consultant. That program is poorly funded. The amount of money that we have is the same as what it was 10 years ago (Ken Rodwell, Wilcannia-Forbes Catholic Education Office, Brewarrina NSW hearing).

Travel

The inaccessibility of much school transport provision and the added impact of long journeys on students with disabilities were described.

My daughter has a disability and she has a wheelchair. One problem we have is the modification of buses. She is getting too heavy to lift into the car (she is 14 years old). She is also unable to go on school excursions. The Education Department says that it is not their responsibility. Well whose responsibility is it? At Fitzroy Crossing we have only one modified bus and that is used every day for Aged Care. We don't have any modified taxis. I have also been trying to get my daughter into a boarding school in Perth but I have not been able to find one that can cater for her needs (public meeting at Fitzroy Crossing WA).

In these days of what is termed efficiency and cost cutting, changing and both traditional and highly mobile populations, small schools are under threat of closure and bus routes are being redefined. Consequently many students still endure long hours on buses to and from school. This is not easy for any child, but most difficult for the student with complex health and or behavioural issues and most difficult for students who struggle for social belonging or who are in particular need of tolerance and special care. Current 'take home' management strategies cause rural families extra-ordinary additional costs if they have to travel long distances to collect a child who has reportedly acted out at school (Annette Herbert, Inclusive Education Network SA, submission, pages 2-3).

Support services

Lack of specialist support services in rural and, especially, remote areas is common, including special education support staff and a range of essential health and disability services.

> *The services for children with disabilities are very hit and miss and uncoordinated. There is no continuity of service of specialist staff either. These staff do not know what has gone on before. There are also long delays for service. We have a child with a broken hearing aid and it has been broken for ages. He has been without it for most of this year* (meeting with the Billiluna WA school community).

Lack of counselling and other support services an issue for teachers in communities under 10,000 - % of respondents

NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
15%	-	12%	22%	13%	35%	13%

Source: YRC Survey Report page 55.

> *Families of children with disabilities do not often stay in a rural or remote community because the support services they need do not exist. There is a lack of access to Guidance Officers, speech pathologists and respite care* (Open Access College SA submission, page 2).

> *Access to medical professionals such as ear, nose and throat specialists is very erratic. It depends very much when they are available to visit the community. Their visits tend to be very random. You get a fax a week beforehand telling you they're coming. Then there is very little follow-up afterwards. Sometimes you don't hear from them until 6 or 12 months later. In the meantime you're tearing your hair out wondering what you should do to help the child* (meeting with teachers' aides in Normanton Qld).

> *Unless a child lives close to a major regional centre, is of very young school age in New South Wales rural districts, the likelihood of them receiving ongoing speech and language therapy is virtually non-existent. That's certainly different from the situation that exists within metropolitan areas of New South Wales. Clearly, the ramifications that that has for the child's learning and ongoing adjustment and development are significant* (Deborah Knight, Director of Dalwood Assessment Centre, Sydney hearing).

Many remote Indigenous schools do not have the special needs staff to which their student profiles entitle them.

> *We've got a lot of special needs students. They need to have a full opportunity and have adequate facilities. Most of them are disadvantaged group. For example in Stuart Park in Darwin they've got a*

special needs class and a special needs teacher; but in Aboriginal communities we want the same (Rosalind Djuwandayngu, Principal of Milingimbi School NT, Darwin hearing).

Acceptance

Although in general the inquiry found that other students are willing to include students with disabilities, teasing was occasionally mentioned.

There's one guy with one leg shorter than the other. He wears a special shoe. The stairs are fine for him. People tease him. Sometimes the students with intellectual disabilities might say or do stupid things and people make fun of them for that. Other than that it's pretty good. People know really not to make fun of them for their problems. And they do have friends, so it's easier for them – they're not totally isolated (student meeting at Bairnsdale Vic).

Some programs for students with disabilities

Otitis media (middle ear infection) can affect up to 70% or 80% of students in some schools every day. It is difficult to address because the group affected changes regularly. Individual schools have initiated programs to address the effects of otitis media. In Nguiu on Bathurst Island NT the inquiry was told that every classroom in the school has an amplification system and the teachers use microphones. Here, as in many schools, an ear program is conducted every morning which involves nose blowing and checking the children's ears. The school at Billiluna WA also has a program of nose blowing and coughing to improve hearing, but there are still a number of students who are in need of medical attention and must wait before a specialist can see them.

Education Queensland produced a CD-ROM professional development package in 1997. Entitled 'Otitis Media: What Every Teacher Should Know', it is designed for use by Indigenous community teachers and provides information on the health, audiological and education management of otitis media (Education Queensland submission, page 17).

The NT Education Minister recently announced a more comprehensive approach to otitis media detection in Territory government schools.

[W]e will require the Head Teacher or Principal in each community to meet regularly with local health personnel to develop strategies that best suit the individual circumstances of each community and to monitor and track the progress of these measures. These new formalised arrangements will be in place for the commencement of the new school year [2000].

A real benefit of these measures will be the earlier detection of hearing and general ear problems which are a key factor affecting Aboriginal children's attentiveness and learning (Hon. Peter Adamson, NT Education Minister, Statement to Parliament, 24 November 1999).

The Dalwood Assessment Centre in Sydney, in conjunction with Palm School, provides an assessment, therapy and remediation service for NSW rural children of infants and primary school age who are experiencing severe learning, speech and language or behavioural and emotional disorders. The service includes assessment, program design, an outreach program, teacher in-servicing, residential programs and consultation services. It combines regular visits by staff to the students and teachers in rural schools and subsidised residential programs and assessment in the Sydney Centre.

Another initiative for students with disabilities is 'Bush Children' in Queensland.

> *There are some positive programs in Mt Isa that provide support for students with disabilities. 'Bush Children' is a community based health program that provides psychologists and other professional support for students with intellectual disabilities. However, its funding is very limited and it also has restrictive age and eligibility requirements. In addition, it is subject to parental consent and parents are sometimes reluctant to admit that their child has an intellectual problem* (public meeting in Mt Isa Qld).

Recommendations received

Integration

Recommendations addressed five principal areas of concern to the inquiry. There is a need to entrench a philosophy and commitment to integration of students with disabilities.

> *If there is inadequacy in schooling for children with disabilities in rural areas I think that we should be trying to address this problem by providing regular schools with the staff/resources they need to be able to provide for children with disabilities. I think in the long run this alternative will not only be cheaper than building and staffing more special schools but will also involve children with disabilities as part of their local community. It would save on travel time, boarding costs and I think it would generally be a lot easier on the children and families* (Tim Loreman, Faculty of Education, Monash University, submission).

> *[T]he education sector and government [should] establish equity policies for children with disabilities from rural and remote areas* (ICPA Qld submission, page 7).

In NSW Family Advocacy recommended

> *Change the state education policy to remove the barriers to all children having a right to be welcomed and educated in the regular class of the local school. A change of policy would clarify the responsibility of the school to all students and force staff to recognise the need to change* (submission, page 3).

Funding and financial assistance

There is a need to review and revise funding formulae to take into account the real costs for schools and for families of children with disabilities and the additional costs attributable to isolation.

> *Students with disabilities from rural and remote areas [should be] funded according to their educational needs, particularly in the areas of transport, equipment and building modifications, individual educational support and therapy services* (SA Independent Schools Board submission, page 18).

> *[A] special needs component [should] be built into the normal government funding methods for families with children with disabilities who live in rural and isolated areas* (ICPA Qld submission, page 7).

Accommodation

There is a need to ensure that all facilities and resources are in place in advance of enrolment of a student with a disability.

> *Ensure effective planning at the local school level so that teachers and parents can prepare from year to year confident that the teacher will have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach all the students in the class* (Family Advocacy NSW submission, page 3).

Staff training

There is a need to skill rural teachers to implement integration effectively.

> *Provide significant, quality training in the philosophy and practice of inclusive education including ensuring all teachers have skills in assessment, curriculum design, instruction and classroom management consistent with today's reality of classrooms of students of mixed ability* (Family Advocacy NSW submission, page 3).

> *Schools that enrol students with disabilities from rural and remote areas [should] be provided with additional funds to support teacher professional development in the area of disability and associated curriculum issues* (SA Independent Schools Board submission, pages 18-19).

Assessment and treatment

Submissions particularly addressed ways to overcome the severe lack of disability assessment, treatment and support services in rural areas. The Director of the Dalwood Assessment Centre in Sydney suggested

> *The answer is probably supplementation to services such as our own ... where we do have the expertise and the facilities to in fact provide the programming for children. The answer is for more access to in-servicing*

> *for those that are working out in the more remote areas and certainly for more professional and peer support and for supplementation and support staff* (Deborah Knight, Sydney hearing).

ICPA Australia called for

> *The provision of mobile early intervention assessment and therapist teams to visit on a regular basis to central locations, accessible to families in rural and remote areas. There have been cases where a child has had to travel up to 500km for one therapist in one centre and another 200km in another direction for another therapist* (submission, page 21).

Ardlethan Central School's recommendations included

- *The number of educational consultants in specialist and curriculum areas who serve remote and rural schools be increased.*
- *The level of counselling available to remote and rural schools be increased to fulfil the needs of the schools.*
- *Students who need specialist health services be provided with transport to those services.*
- *Specialist health services such as speech therapy be accessible and provided free to remote and rural school children.*
- *Remote and rural schools need to have spaces for visiting specialist health services provided as standard in their building formula.*
- *Reading Recovery resourcing for remote and rural schools be provided at a level at least twice the current level.*
- *Integration support to students in remote and rural schools be generous and assured by the priority staffing of remote and rural schools with teachers with specialist training or aptitude for working with integrated students.*
- *Specialist teacher aide training be provided for adults in the communities of remote and rural schools to ensure a pool of trained aides for students with disabilities* (submission, pages 8-9).

Where students with disabilities must live away from home to continue their education, it was recommended that 'a range of appropriate accommodation options ... including hostel, small community houses and private board' should be made available (YRC Survey Report page 68).

6. Indigenous students

> ... *the education of the child shall be directed to (c) the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilizations different from his or her own* ... (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 29.1).

In this chapter

- Numbers and situation
- Access and support
- Barriers to participation and success
- Outcomes
- Indigenous cultural studies
- Indigenous languages
- Recommendations

Numbers and situation

There are about 120,000 Indigenous students in Australia, including pre-school, school and VET students. In NSW Indigenous students make up 3.5% of enrolments in government schools compared with 38% in the NT; under 1% in Victoria compared with 58% in the Kimberley region of WA.

In many parts of Australia Indigenous people – adults and children alike – have become alienated from the school system. Participation, attendance and retention rates for Indigenous students are lower than for others. However, the inquiry observed that, where parents and community members play an active and decision-making role in the school, students enjoy their schooling and feel optimistic about their current and future prospects. On Bathurst Island, for example, the inquiry was told

> *School is lots of fun. There are lots of activities. It's not just sport. School is about education and education is power for me. And there are a lot of things that I need to know about the whole world. When I leave school I might go to a University in Darwin. I want to be a scientist. I will find a school in Darwin before I go to University. In future I hope to be President of the Land Council* (student meeting at Nguiu NT).

> *I want to come to school and I want to get a better job in my community. I want to be a Councillor. I'm not sure how long I will be at school but after school I would like to do some VET subjects or go to Batchelor [Institute]* (student meeting at Nguiu NT)

The Tiwi people and the Land Councils of both Bathurst and Melville Islands have developed a '2010 Plan'. Positions in community employment are identified and all that is required to ensure Tiwi people are adequately trained and qualified to take each position by the year 2010 will be put in train.

We're heading towards 2010, maybe sooner, to take over the main positions that the non-Tiwis have on this island. We are heading towards this position and as you know education is a major key; it plays a major role towards that. So the education has to be one that our children are happy with and we want our children to succeed and to achieve outcomes in that process (public meeting at Nguiu NT).

Access and support

The lack of schools in many Indigenous communities and the inappropriateness of boarding and distance education as alternatives have been raised in Chapter 3. Whether education is accessible and available should be measured by objective criteria. Students must have access to education in fact and not just in theory. They must have access to education without forfeiting other rights such as the right to rest and leisure or participation in family and cultural events. The right to education is violated if accessing education is substantially harder or more onerous, without reasonable cause or necessity, for one group than another or harder for a substantially higher proportion of one group over another.

Another critical aspect of accessibility of schooling is cultural appropriateness. Yet the inquiry heard that most schools still operate on an assimilationist paradigm.

Current mainstream schools perpetuate attitudes and values which do not reflect the culture and lives of Indigenous students (Beverley Angeles, Indigenous Education Council, Darwin hearing).

Aboriginal cultural studies and cross-cultural education are not prerequisites to graduation for all Australian student teachers although, the inquiry was told, in NSW and WA teachers are currently being 'in-serviced' in cultural awareness.

Few teachers can report that their initial training and qualification has properly prepared them to either teach indigenous students or to provide non indigenous students with an understanding of the history and culture of Australia's indigenous people (Independent Education Union submission, page 16).

Teaching staff employed in the communities have little understanding of the Indigenous culture and maybe non-Aboriginal teachers need to have ongoing workshops about culture and Aboriginal education issues, to even begin to understand how to teach or effectively teach Indigenous students (Yipirinya School NT submission).

All school systems recognise the need to engage Indigenous educators. Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) provide assistance to classroom teachers and carry out community liaison functions. Their role typically includes curriculum development work and classroom management assistance. The experience of the Moree Time Out Centre, which provides an

alternative education program for students at risk, testifies to the significance of AIEWs.

> *... for the last 12 months 90% of our students have been non-Aboriginal. But up until then my students were 90% Aboriginal. We have had a sudden change around within the community in the last 12 months. At the moment I have no Aboriginal students within the Centre ... Courallie High [one of two referring schools] got a very large amount of funding in the last financial period to employ 7 Aboriginal tutors to help within the school and before that the majority of my students came from Courallie. That then opened it up for Moree High to refer more students. It is first in, first served. That funding made a difference to Courallie High, a very big difference. Moree High did not get that funding* (Anne Taylor, Moree Time Out Centre, Moree NSW hearing).

AIEWs also provide Indigenous language, literacy and cultural awareness activities within the school. However, the inquiry was told that there are still too few AIEWs and that their terms and conditions of employment and their career path opportunities under-value their qualifications and contribution. AIEWs should have the opportunity to translate their qualifications and experience into a full teaching qualification.

> *[We need] identified Aboriginal teaching positions in all schools. [We also need to] enhance the pathways for Indigenous people wanting to be educators in their community* (Yipirinya School NT submission).

> *The main concern of the Aboriginal Education Workers is the temporary nature of their positions or ambiguity about their positions. Meetings and visits have revealed that only one Catholic employer [in NSW and ACT] has granted permanency as a general rule to Aboriginal Education Workers. Another Catholic employer has some permanent workers (although the workers were not aware of their status) others are issued temporary contracts. Permanent staff are employed only in areas with a very high Aboriginal population.*

> *In addition, the ill defined nature of the role does provide difficulties for AEWs in some circumstances. Some are under utilised or are used for limited tasks not particularly related to students and community needs (eg sharpening pencils, photocopying) whilst others have a very demanding role that often exceeds paid time allocations and levels of remuneration* (Diet Calliope, Indigenous Adviser, NSW/ACT Independent Education Union, submission, pages 2-3).

Barriers to participation and success

> *[There are] significant shortcomings within the education system which has failed Indigenous people in a number of ways. These include, for example, the lack of relevance to Indigenous needs, culture, knowledge and experience; failure to engage Indigenous children in the learning process, particularly beyond the compulsory years; failure to effectively*

> *address the issues of racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous students, both in the school environment and in the job market; failure to effectively involve parents and communities in their children's education and the inadequate number of teachers with appropriate skills and cultural knowledge and the lack of facilities available to students in rural and remote areas* (David Curtis, ATSIC Commissioner, Melbourne hearing).

The inquiry also heard that there are high rates of disability and illness among Indigenous school students in NT, WA, NSW and Queensland.

> *As a direct result of poverty many Indigenous children suffer from acute health problems such as under nutrition, hepatitis B and anaemia which affects their ability to learn at school as well as their attendance. Vision and hearing difficulties occur very commonly and Indigenous children are susceptible to a broad range of infectious diseases. Major ear diseases such as Otitis Media impair learning ability. Hearing problems may account for some of the classroom 'disruption' where hearing impaired Indigenous children make use of their peers (often seated adjacent) to 'translate'. In conventionally structured class situations, such activity is likely to be interpreted by teachers as disruptive behaviour and the removal of this source can disadvantage a child's progress. Otitis Media and other health problems also account for frequent absences from school for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* (ATSIC submission, pages 27-28).

Outcomes

> *The Commonwealth Government, together with all State and Territory Governments, recognises that Australia's Indigenous people are 'the most educationally disadvantaged group in the community'. Indigenous people participate in and attain significantly less from education than the rest of the Australian population and this impacts adversely on their economic and social well-being* (DETYA submission, page 12).

A significant number of Indigenous students do not complete the compulsory years of schooling. For example, only 94.2% of Indigenous students progressed from Year 8 in 1997 to Year 9 in 1998 (DETYA submission, page 89). In 1994 over one-third of Indigenous 15 to 24 year olds had not completed Year 10 (ATSIC submission, page 15).

> *[T]he non-completion rate can be far greater for rural and remote locations, for example, 63.4% for Bourke and 84.2% for Aputula* (David Curtis, ATSIC Commissioner, Melbourne hearing).

Attendance by those enrolled is also relatively low, sometimes falling to an estimated 20% attendance (for example, during ceremony times) (ATSIC submission, page 26). The school retention rate to Year 12 for Indigenous students is around 33% compared to almost 73% for all students (DETYA submission, page 89).

Indigenous students are, therefore, very likely to leave school much less qualified than non-Indigenous students.

> *In urban locations approximately 35% of Indigenous primary school students had significantly lower literacy and numeracy achievement compared with approximately 43% in rural and remote locations. The percentage of other Australian students with significantly lower literacy and numeracy achievement levels was estimated at 16% in both urban and rural and remote locations* (DETYA submission, page 48).

The experience of Bourke Public School in north-western NSW, where 50% of students are Aboriginal, demonstrates that poor outcomes are by no means inevitable for Indigenous children.

> *The kids come first. Bourke Public School in 1999 attempts to be a child-centred community school. [We have] a needs-based literacy and numeracy program, where children can work at their own developmental stage. We were fortunate enough to kick on the literacy push two years before it became a departmental agenda and it has evolved to meet the needs of our kids. One of the indicators ... was that last year our Year 5 Aboriginal kids were less than 1% under all our kids in literacy in BST [Basic Skills Test]. I think there are few schools that are big schools that can make that claim. We have a current attendance rate of 92%. I think the fundamental rule is that every child should be able to do the work. When they go home and mum and dad or nan says to them 'What sort of a day did you have today, what did you learn?', those kids should be able to actually tell their parents that they have learnt something.*
>
> *There may be other schools that have the computer technology that we have but there wouldn't be too many that have better facilities. We have across this school 8 separate Internet sites and we have a train full of computers so that each child has their own machine. We have information terminals in the library, scanning facilities and digital camera facilities. We have just established a global classroom approved as a pilot scheme where a group of 30 kids will actually work with a facilitator not a teacher. The facilitator will work with them on what they would like to learn, how they will learn it, how they will present it, what outcomes they will be chasing while they are doing it* (Paul Loxley, Principal of Bourke Public School, Bourke NSW hearing).

Indigenous cultural studies

The major objective of the Commonwealth, State and Territory education departments is to improve Indigenous student attendance rates and their English literacy and numeracy outcomes. The inquiry found that the teaching of comprehensive Indigenous cultural studies courses is limited in both government and Catholic school systems although there is increasing awareness of the need to provide an Indigenous perspective.

> *The Aboriginal Studies syllabus itself, like most other syllabi, is not compulsory. However, there are mandatory sections on Aboriginal Studies in other syllabuses, namely History and Geography, Year 7 to 10 syllabuses; and the new primary Human Society and Its Environment syllabus also has mandatory Aboriginal education components* (George Green, Assistant Director-General (Student Services and Equity Programs), NSW Department of Education and Training, Sydney hearing).

In Moree NSW the inquiry was told

> *There are very few resources if you want to teach Aboriginal studies in primary school. We have Aboriginal aides in schools to develop resources for the whole community and they are not developing local material. The reason that this is happening is because principals don't see Aboriginal education as a priority* (public meeting in Moree NSW).

A survey of WA government schools in 1997 showed that only 88 out of 768 (11.5%) offered Aboriginal Studies and 29 out of 827 (3.5%) offered programs in 19 Aboriginal languages. Six of 25 Aboriginal pre-schools (24%) offered Aboriginal languages (EDWA 1998).

There are four main arguments for teaching local Indigenous history, culture, language and values in schools.

1. Indigenous children have a right to learn their own history, culture and language.

   In our remote areas there are many linguistic backgrounds. These languages are the lifeline for the remote communities, because you cannot separate culture from language .. Language gives identity, it gives self-esteem, it makes Indigenous people unique ... (Sister Anne Gardiner, Darwin hearing).

2. Indigenous children will have better learning outcomes if they learn their own history, culture and language as well as other curriculum.

   The local people help out and they try and get out into the environment once a fortnight and I do feel that the students actually learn more by doing things and seeing things so it is very much focused on that level. I would say it is one of the most enjoyable subjects that they have experienced (Ruythe Dufty, Principal of Brewarrina Central School, Brewarrina NSW hearing).

   Experts increasingly recognize how important it is for children to use their mother tongue when they begin school. Use of this tongue validates their experiences. It helps them learn about the nature of language itself and how to use language to make sense of the world, including all aspects of the school curriculum. The mother tongue is an essential foundation for learning (UNICEF 1999).

3. Indigenous history, culture and language are most relevant for students intending to make their lives and careers in their Indigenous communities.

   2-Unit Maths and Japanese are going to be of no value or use to that community in the long run. Why sit there wasting time? If they made it relevant to the local community it's going to benefit the community: offer apprenticeship courses through a joint Schools-TAFE program; hands-on things that our kids are really good at (meeting with Aboriginal education workers in Moree NSW).

4. Teaching Indigenous history, culture and language to non-Indigenous students promotes tolerance and racial harmony.

   The racism won't change until Koorie culture is compulsory in the curriculum (meeting with Koorie workers in Bairnsdale Vic).

Indigenous languages

Almost one-third of Indigenous students live in rural and remote Australia and up to one-third of those speak a language other than English as their first language. This figure does not include Aboriginal English which is only slowly being recognised as a distinct variant of English. More than 50 Indigenous languages are spoken by NT students, for example.

Current government policies and funding emphasise English literacy for Indigenous students.

> *English literacy, oracy and numeracy are essential for economic survival in today's age. Developing these skills will give Aboriginal students options for full participation in mainstream society. The option to stay and work in their communities or, if they so chose, to move on to other places. Aboriginal students deserve, and are entitled to, the same options as other Australians* (Hon. Peter Adamson, NT Minister for Education, Statement to Parliament, 24 November 1999).

In many remote Indigenous communities in WA, for example, 'literacy is still being delivered as though English is the first language [although] children speak their own language until they attend school' (YRC Survey Report page 45).

> *"[W]hen students come to school fluent in their primary language and they leave school essentially monolingual in English we have negated the meaning of the word education because we have made them less than they were"* (Gwen Bucknell, Notre Dame University, Broome WA hearing, quoting Cummings 1990).

Indigenous witnesses and other experienced commentators noted that Indigenous people want and expect to have 'the same options as other

Australians', including English fluency, *as well as* full access to their own languages and cultures.

> *When community people were asked their views on what education and/or school was for, 'to be able to compete with mainstream kids and hopefully get a job' was the desire most had for themselves/their children. It also became clear that this should not be gained at any cost, and that Indigenous cultural values should not be disregarded* (ATSIC submission, page 32).

> *First of all, we don't want people making assimilations. We want to try and work on this to improve children's first language then we'll think about learning the other language, the foreign language which is called English* (Rosalind Djuwandayngu, Principal of Milingimbi School NT, Darwin hearing).

> *Whilst promoting local languages through the school curriculum, Torres Strait Islander students also have the right to learn and master the English language* (Sue Whatman, Qld University of Technology, submission, page 2).

Students observed the irony of having to learn a foreign language when they could not learn their own.

> *At Moree Technology High we've got Japanese in Year 7. That's kind of a waste of time because after that it just dies. I don't know what the point of that is. We only do it because it's compulsory to learn a language in Year 7. There is no Aboriginal language program at either Moree or Courallie* (student meeting in Moree NSW).

> *We are learning Indonesian but we would prefer to learn the native Aboriginal language in our area. We used to be able to study it in Year 4 but you can't do it any more. We don't have any say over the languages that we do at school. The teachers choose them* (student meeting in South Hedland WA).

Recommendations received

> *ATSIC proposes ... three basic principles which should form the basis for progress for Indigenous people in education. These principles are:*
>
> *Community self-determination within the education system is integral to realising education outcomes for Indigenous children. This is necessary to ensure acceptance and involvement of Indigenous people in the education system.*
>
> *Respect for Indigenous knowledge and a recognition of the need for cultural maintenance should be apparent in education provided to Indigenous children. This would provide a foundation and make the education system relevant and appropriate.*

> *And education needs should be seen in relation to and integrated with other requirements of the community such as health, housing, general community infrastructure. This will ensure the effectiveness of education strategies by taking into consideration the range of other factors impinging on educational participation and achievement* (David Curtis, ATSIC Commissioner, Melbourne hearing).

ATSIC made five recommendations.

> *Recommendations: (1) adoption of the three key guiding principles for Indigenous education, planning and services; (2) a national forum funded by DETYA to consider options for a national Indigenous education organisation; (3) establishment of human rights benchmarks as a basis for monitoring and assessing the achievements of Indigenous education; (4) increase research effort, in particular on the relationship between education outcomes and the various sectors including housing, health, infrastructure, good practice in Indigenous rural and remote education; (5) an inventory ordered of all primary and secondary school resources and facilities available to Indigenous people in rural and remote Australia to be undertaken by federal and state education departments* (David Curtis, ATSIC Commissioner, Melbourne hearing).

Learning styles

There was recognition of the need for teachers to understand and respond to the different learning styles of Indigenous children.

> *The ability of teachers of Indigenous students to understand how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn – a point that quite regularly gets overlooked when discussing the needs of Indigenous students in a predominantly non-Indigenous environment. Many teachers who teach Indigenous students are not even aware that they learn differently than their non-Indigenous counterparts, let alone utilise these different learning styles to create an education program that is stimulating and contextually challenging for Indigenous students* (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria submission, page 7).

> *It was reported that, after Indigenous boys are initiated at fourteen to fifteen, they are unwilling to attend school. One comment (ATSIC worker, WA) was that 'boys go to school, but men go to training'* (YRC Survey Report page 65).

Indigenous languages

With respect to Indigenous languages ATSIC recommended

> *Indigenous languages should be treated as a legitimate part of the mainstream education system, either through bilingual education or Languages Other Than English (LOTE) programs and that State*

Education authorities should aim to increase the number of Indigenous languages accredited within the school system (ATSIC supplementary submission, page 2).

There was strong support for the right of Indigenous children to learn their own language and culture together with English and other mainstream curriculum.

> *The ACDE generally supports government-sponsored efforts to raise literacy and numeracy standards. However, such programs must not be implemented at the expense of vernacular language and culture initiatives which have been negotiated with communities, otherwise they will be counter-productive. Top-down decisions such as the NT Government's decision to phase out bilingual education programs can send the message that Aboriginal language and culture have little importance now in the education of an Indigenous child. The ACDE sees room for both in any well-balanced educational program. Schools can only become vibrant community resources that powerfully support the education of those who are part of them, if local knowledges, languages and social systems are represented in them* (Australian Council of Deans of Education submission, page 7).

> *Equity of educational outcomes means not just providing strategies to raise retention or graduation rates, but also incorporating Indigenous perspectives and raising awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and promotion of human rights generally within the education system. 'Aboriginal children need to be strong in their own cultural identity first' was how one parent expressed the need to counter 'some of the [misinformation] still being taught about Australian history and Indigenous cultures'* (ATSIC submission, page 33).

Cultural and language immersion

A number of witnesses argued for cultural immersion and language immersion in Indigenous education. In the context of language teaching, 'immersion education' is an approach to the teaching of language in which that language is adopted as the medium of instruction. The objective of immersion education is the mastery of the target language which, for reasons of pedagogical efficiency, is selected as the medium of instruction.

> *... quite clearly, the overwhelming push amongst Indigenous people in education worldwide is for cultural immersion. There is a huge rejection of perspectives to curricula because they believe they're piecemeal and won't work. To quote one of the Maori elders of the time, 'We need to bring in and immerse' - he was talking, obviously, about his own culture – 'their kids in Maoritanga language and live it and breathe it in the school environment.' That has extended and flowed on to tertiary levels; so they now have, right through to tertiary levels and teacher training in Maoritanga. Quite clearly, I see that that's where we need to go and the AECG would be of that opinion ... I think cultural immersion through Indigenous schools, publicly funded, are a real option that we need to*

> *look at, where we can give back culture and regenerate that in terms that Indigenous people control* (Professor John Lester, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Sydney hearing).

Imparting to the Indigenous community real ownership of the education of their children, which requires at a minimum full participation in school decision-making, was also emphasised.

> *The involvement of parents and communities in the school environment and decision making is considered crucial to the improvement of participation, achievement and outcomes for Indigenous students. It is crucial that parents be provided with the skills and resources to effectively participate and to be active partners in the education of their children* (ATSIC submission, page 26).

> *We want to have ownership of the program; people need to be proud of what they are and what we are. We don't want people coming into our school and changing everything. It happened a long time ago, assimilation, and now we're going backwards again* (Rosalind Djuwandayngu, Principal of Milingimbi School NT, Darwin hearing).

7. A human rights approach

In this chapter
- The right to education
- Availability and accessibility
- Quality
- Respect for human rights
- Challenges

The right to education

'Everyone has the right to education' (1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* article 26). This right has been re-stated in three treaties binding on Australia since it was first set out in the Universal Declaration: the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966, article 13); the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989, article 28); UNESCO *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (1960). Australia's commitment to education for all and to compulsory education for children pre-dates even the earliest international human rights statements to this effect.

Education is recognised as a key instrument for enabling everyone to participate effectively in a free society and for promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among ethnic groups (*International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* article 13.1).

> *Education is a precondition for the exercise of human rights ... [F]reedom of information, expression, assembly and association, the right to vote ... depend on at least a minimum level of education, including literacy ... [T]he right to choose work ... to form trade unions, to take part in cultural life ... can only be exercised in a meaningful way after a minimum level of education has been achieved* (Nowak 1995, page 189).

> *Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. Education has a vital role in empowering women, safeguarding children from exploitative and hazardous labour and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment, and controlling population growth. Increasingly, education is recognized as one of the best financial investments States can make. But the importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, is one of the joys and rewards of human existence* (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 1).

The broad framework of Australia's implementation of this right cannot be criticised. However, in some of the detail our performance can and must be improved, in some cases quite dramatically. This booklet identifies the major shortfalls.

Human rights standards – negotiated and agreed among nations – set the benchmark against which the Commission will evaluate Australia's performance. This chapter summarises the fundamental principles of international human rights applicable to the inquiry's terms of reference and sets out some of the major challenges posed by Australia's obligations for our implementation of the right to education.

Availability and accessibility

Australia has recognised the right of everyone to education and undertaken to make primary and secondary education available to all (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 28 and *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* article 13). The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has pointed out that the provision of education must be characterised by four features to satisfy this undertaking: it must be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable.

'Availability' means that 'functioning educational institutions and programmes have to be available in sufficient quantity'.

> *What they require to function depends upon numerous factors, including the developmental context within which they operate; for example, all institutions and programmes are likely to require buildings or other protection from the elements, sanitation facilities for both sexes, safe drinking water, trained teachers receiving domestically competitive salaries, teaching materials, and so on; while some will also require facilities such as a library, computer facilities and information technology* (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 13* (1999), paragraph 6).

'Accessibility' has three dimensions. It must be available to all without discrimination, in law and in fact, physically accessible and economically accessible. The Committee requires education to be 'within safe physical reach, either by attendance at some reasonably convenient geographic location (e.g. a neighbourhood school) or via modern technology (e.g. access to a "distance learning" programme)' (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 6). Education must also be affordable to all.

Primary education must be 'free of charge'. The Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Committee has noted that this language is used 'to ensure the availability of primary education without charge to the child, parents or guardians' since '[f]ees imposed by the Government, the local authorities or the school, and other direct costs, constitute disincentives to the enjoyment of the right [to education] and may jeopardize its realisation'. The Committee warns against the imposition of indirect costs including 'voluntary' levies or 'the

obligation to wear a relatively expensive uniform' (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 7).

Australia has also undertaken to work progressively towards the introduction of free secondary education. Once a free secondary education is available for all, as has been the case in Australia, fees should only be reintroduced for exceptional reasons.

> *There is a strong presumption of impermissibility of any retrogressive measures taken in relation to the right to education ... If any deliberately retrogressive measures are taken, the State party has the burden of proving that they have been introduced after the most careful consideration of all alternatives and that they are fully justified by reference to the totality of the rights provided for in the Covenant and in the context of the full use of the State Party's maximum available resources* (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 45).

'Acceptability' means that 'the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, have to be acceptable (e.g. relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality) to students and, in appropriate cases, parents' (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 6).

'Adaptability' means that 'education has to be flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 6).

Quality

These four features also impact on the quality of the education provided in Australia. The quality issues raised with the inquiry relate primarily to equity for rural and remote students as compared with urban students. Witnesses felt that differences in the way rural and remote students access their education so substantially disadvantage those students as to amount to discrimination. They point to the significant differences in average outcomes for country students, including literacy, numeracy, Year 12 retention, participation in tertiary education and unemployment rates, to argue that the differences must be overcome to ensure country children's right to education.

Particular differences were

- less experienced teachers and higher staff turnover
- fewer opportunities for competition with peers at State standard in academic subjects and in others such as sport, dance and debating
- substantially less and less ready access to information technologies
- fewer opportunities to participate in the cultural and political life of the nation
- fewer opportunities for work experience while still attending school.

The *Convention against Discrimination in Education*, to which Australia is a party, states that an inferior standard of education can amount to unlawful discrimination. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has

given, as one example of discrimination, 'sharp disparities in spending policies that result in differing qualities of education for persons residing in different geographic locations' (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 35).

Respect for human rights

The human rights of all children must be respected in the way their right to education is provided. The inquiry's terms of reference draw attention to the particular vulnerability of Indigenous children, children with disabilities and children from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The principal human rights to be investigated are

- the right to an education which is non-discriminatory and which develops the child's abilities to the fullest
- the right to a curriculum which develops respect for human rights and for the child's own family and culture as well as for national values
- the right to educational decision-making which makes the best interests of each child a primary consideration as advised by the child's parents and by the child himself or herself.

Every child has the right to education. Geography, remoteness, distance, language, culture, religion, disability and sex cannot be used as excuses when a child's right to education is denied. Children are entitled to enjoy their rights without discrimination of any kind. This requires Australia to 'ensure' that no discrimination occurs, either in law or in actual practice.

> *States parties must closely monitor education – including all relevant policies, institutions, programmes, spending patterns and other practices – so as to identify and take measures to redress any de facto discrimination* (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraph 37).

The rule against discrimination does not mean that a 'one education fits all' approach would be justified. Educationalists would disapprove of such an approach as ineffective in ensuring quality education for all children. So too does human rights law.

> *The adoption of temporary special measures intended to bring about de facto equality for men and women and for disadvantaged groups is not a violation of the right to non-discrimination with regard to education, so long as such measures do not lead to the maintenance of unequal or separate standards for different groups, and provided they are not continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.*
>
> *In some circumstances, separate education systems or institutions for groups [including groups defined by race or sex] shall be deemed not to constitute a breach of the Covenant* (*General Comment No. 13*, paragraphs 32 and 33).

The education provided for each child needs to be geared to achieving the aim of developing his or her personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to

their fullest potential (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 29.1(a)). This means that education needs to be individually tailored *to the extent needed* to promote the individual's development as described.

The *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (article 13) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (article 29) set out the aims of education. They should be

- the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential
- the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilisations different from his or her own
- the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among all peoples
- the development of respect for the national environment.

In decision-making about education provision the best interests of each child affected must be a primary consideration (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 3.1). As Australia's High Court has noted

> *[A] decision-maker with an eye to the principle enshrined in the Convention would be looking to the best interests of the children as a primary consideration, asking whether the force of any other consideration outweighed it* (*Ah Hin Teoh* 1995, page 292).

Parents and other family members are, naturally, vitally interested in the education provided for their children. Their right to guide their children in the exercise of their human rights is protected by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (article 5). Parents and other individuals and bodies are free to establish independent educational institutions, provided these comply with the Convention and conform to minimum standards laid down by the State (article 29.2). The right of parents to 'ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions' is guaranteed by article 18.4 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. In exercising these rights, parents must make the best interests of their children their 'basic concern' (article 18).

Children who are sufficiently mature to understand the issues are also entitled to have a say in their education and decision-makers must develop methodologies for collecting and taking account of their freely expressed views (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 12). The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasised that education must be 'acceptable' to the students. Satisfaction of this element of the right to education clearly requires the participation of students at least to the extent of evaluating the quality of education provision. In fact 'acceptability' will be enhanced when students are also involved in the planning and design of education facilities and curricula.

Challenges

Children and their families should not be expected to sacrifice their other rights in order to access an education. An extreme example would be where the only accessible school for a child affiliated with one religion is run by another denomination which requires all students to participate in that denomination's religious practices. Such an education would violate the child's right to freedom of religion (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 14).

For most Australian children the issue is not one of total sacrifice but of finding a reasonable balance: for boarders, the balance between a high quality secondary education and the right to family life (*Convention on the Rights of the Child* article 8); for those living at home, the balance between long hours of travel to and from school and the right to rest and leisure (article 31); for an Aboriginal child, the balance between attending a senior secondary school in a capital city and the right to participate in his or her own language, culture and religion with community members (article 30).

Human rights law poses a number of other challenges for the Commission in its response to the issues raised by the evidence to the inquiry and for Australian education authorities in implementing their obligations. These include

- determining what is a minimum acceptable standard of education provision for children in all parts of Australia, how that standard can be ensured to every child and how the resources can be provided for that purpose
- the question whether every Australian child is entitled to early childhood education
- the question to what extent choice must be available and to what extent the government has the responsibility to ensure choice - for example choice of a religious education or choice of particular courses
- the question to what extent the individual child's talents and/or particular needs must be accommodated within a reasonable distance of his or her home at government expense
- providing education to Indigenous children in both the language, culture and values of their own community and those of the broader Australian community to enable their full participation in both
- balancing the right of a child with a behavioural or other disability to integration in a mainstream classroom and the rights of the other students to receive an education.

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